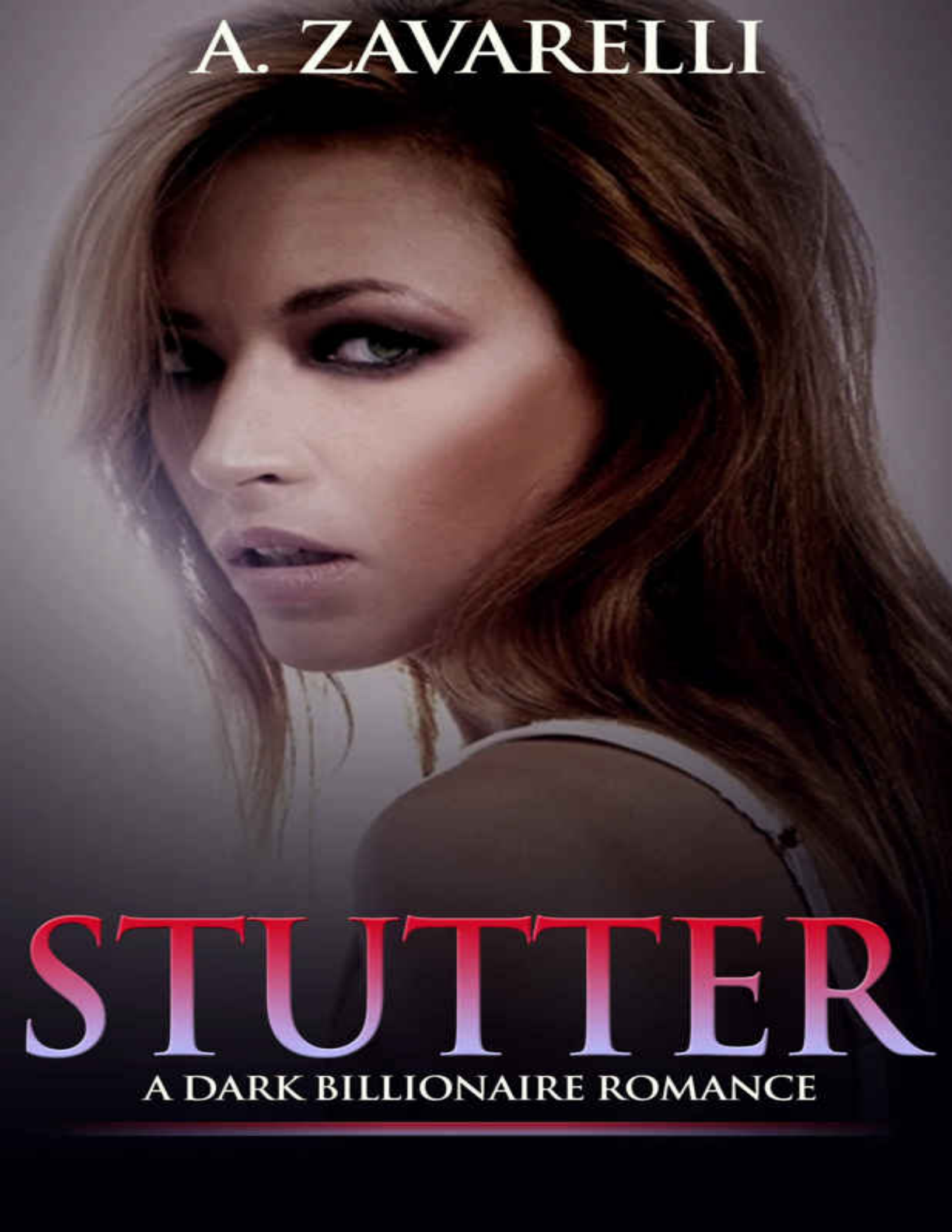




A. ZAVARELLI

STUTTER

A DARK BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

Stutter

A Bleeding Hearts Novel

by

A. Zavarelli

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*My heart is a compass, and it always leads me back
to you.*

Chapter One

Ryland

Obsession was a fickle beast.

One minute, it was bloodlust, and the next it was sunshine wrapped in silk. I'd never been one for poetics or waxing philosophical, but I could write a bible about Brighton fucking Valentine. The red-headed bombshell came into my life and tipped the whole world on its axis.

Obsession.

It clawed at me and burrowed deep into my skin, eating at the layers of self-entitlement I'd constructed over the years.

I was entitled to my rage. My hatred. I was entitled to purge the world of the very life essence I despised with the fire of a thousand suns. And, finally, I was entitled to her.

But in the end, she had been right. I couldn't have them both.

Cue the cruel and mocking laughter from the puppet master of this fucked up sideshow.

My plans had been derailed and replaced with something else. For purposes of description, I'd call it an unexpected hiccup. But not weakness. Never weakness.

I fucking despised weakness. Weakness was my father, Michael Lockhart. Weakness was the man I'd been six years ago, unable to save Sophia. Weakness had no place in my heart or my mind, and that was the conundrum. In this case, $x + y \neq z$. There was no simple solution. There were no trivial plot points in Brighton and I's story. No insignificant drivel to drive a wedge between us. Only the hard shit. The impossible choices.

To be horrifically frank, there was only one solution that gave me what I wanted in this scenario. It involved sacrifice. And if you were familiar with my shenanigans and had a lick of sense about you, you've surely surmised that I was a selfish bastard by now. You'd be right. A man like me didn't make sacrifices. Not anymore. Men like me took. And the world bent over and gave it up without a fight, because, well, we were just that goddamn charming, right?

I was raised in a good family. Practically came out of the womb with a silver spoon in my over-privileged mouth. Michael groomed me to be an esteemed businessman like him, all the while my mother doted on me and told me how handsome and sweet I was. I had it made.

But it was an illusion, you see. They had it all wrong. I wasn't sweet. And I would never do business like my father.

When they were dead and buried in the ground, I'd embraced a new motto in life. Fuck anyone who gets in your way before they can fuck you first. Ruthless. Those were my business practices. I ruled with an iron fist in my personal and professional life. I was accustomed to getting my way by now and I wasn't at all ashamed of it. Why should I be? After all, everybody secretly wants things to go their way. Spare me the self-righteous bullshit and just acknowledge it's a cold, hard truth.

I'd always had a dark side. Dark fantasies. When my grief was so thick I could practically choke on it, I used it as an excuse to indulge. A nip here, a belt mark there, a little rough spanking every now and again. It was all child's play until Brighton came into my life.

She made the beast rear its ugly head. Stirred fantasies in my mind I would have never otherwise entertained. Owning her wasn't enough. Controlling her didn't douse the inferno blazing inside me. No, I needed more from her. I needed everything. Body, mind, soul.

Cruel?

You'd be the judge on that. Was it cruel if someone asked for it? Begged for it, even? She always begged. Even now, I could hear her whimpering for me. Christ, those noises she made. A one-way ticket to heaven.

If we were going with cheesy metaphors, Brighton was undoubtedly an angel. That milky skin, those rosy cheeks... the way her lips parted just so when I touched her in all the right places. And where did that leave me for wanting to corrupt something so pure? Surely, that would be the devil.

I'd tainted her. Debased and degraded her. And I'd enjoyed every moment of it. I wouldn't lie about that. My moral compass was broken, sure. But there was something still intact. Something that I'd sort of wished would disappear. Most people would call it a conscience. To me, it was nothing more than a hindrance.

But that was neither here nor there.

Truth be told, none of it made a lick of difference anymore. Good, bad, right, wrong. It all faded and blended together into one giant hole of blackness since she'd gone.

I had a theory about Lucifer. About his true intentions. But as I mentioned before, I wasn't one for waxing philosophical. So instead, I'd like to skip ahead to the most important question. Could the fallen ever really be redeemed?

The last five years had been a series of carefully orchestrated events. Every move, every strategy had been poured over in painstaking detail before it was set into motion.

Pieces on a chess board.

A collision of fate and circumstance. I'd planned for every hitch. Every contingency. Except the one that blindsided me like a vat of acid to the face.

I fell in love with her.

Had it been anyone else spouting such out of character nonsense, you probably wouldn't have batted an eye. But for a man who already had such obsessive tendencies, it was a recipe for disaster. It was, in fact, the reason why I was sitting in this upscale boutique on a Wednesday afternoon when I should have been working.

The woman across the desk had been sporting fuck-me eyes for the last twenty minutes while I stared off into the empty abyss. She'd informed me that the menagerie of glittering jewels laid out before me were all precious gems. I'd concluded she didn't know the meaning of the word.

Don't get me wrong. The jewels were nice. Exquisite even. They reeked of sophistication and money. And therefore, they were completely worthless. Anything this pretentious would smother the very life right out of Brighton's innocent soul. She wouldn't wear any of it, and this had been a wasted trip.

How did I ever think this was a good idea? I shook my head in disgust and pushed the velvet display case back to the attendant seated

across from me. She wasn't pleased by this.

"Perhaps if you told me what you were looking for, Mr. Bennett."

I closed my eyes, and all I could see was Brighton crushed into that pocket of metal. Blood. So much fucking blood. Hollow breaths. Smoke and water. Her tears and my dread, so thick it suffocated me. These images haunted me day and night.

Did I deserve them? You'd probably say yes, and again you'd be right. I knew that now. But did it matter?

Little too fucking late.

I needed a drink. Maybe a priest. Something to numb my blackened soul and vanquish this nightmare.

"What does one get for the woman they almost killed?" I asked.

The attendant's head rattled with nervous laughter, her eyes darting about. She thought I was joking.

I wasn't.

"What says, I'm really fucking sorry and I need you to believe me?"

The insufferable giggling persisted, only to be followed up by a fluttering of lashes. She didn't get it-I was really asking her. Desperation had a strangle hold on me.

She finally got a grip of herself and pointed to the gaudiest ring on the display case. "I like to say bigger is better in this case."

I frowned at her salacious tone and actually shuddered. For all of my faults, there was one thing that remained steadfast in my intentions. I only wanted one woman, and it wasn't the one sitting across from me.

"I'll think it over."

I pushed back my chair, and the attendant scurried to her feet. "Just let me know if there's anything special you'd like. I can find it, I'm sure of it."

"Of course." I gave her a thin smile. What I needed wasn't in this store though. Redemption couldn't be bought here.

I stepped outside and met Ted at the curb. He endeavored idle chit chat while driving me back to work, but I wasn't in the mood. I hadn't been in the mood for anything but wallowing in my own self-loathing for the last month.

I dialed Mick, and he answered on the first ring. For the tidy sum I padded his bank account with, I'd expect nothing less.

"Yeah, boss?"

I got straight to the point. "How's my girl today?"

"All's quiet on the home front," he replied. "Don't think she's even left the apartment."

I should've been content with that. I wasn't. Like the greedy fiend I was, I'd grown more demanding of the photos I required to see me through the day. It was the only connection I had to her and yes that's what'd it come to. I wasn't proud. I was in love. And love's a bitch.

"I want an update every hour," I said. "Even if there's nothing to report."

Mick was silent for a moment before mumbling his agreement. He had his own opinions on this whole situation. Opinions I had no inclination to hear or give a fuck about.

"You got it, boss."

I moved to hang up before I thought of something else. "Did she get my flowers today?"

"She sent them back, sir," he said quietly.

As I expected. It was the same every other day.

Chapter Two

Brighton

Staring down at the sonogram in my hand, I fought away tears for the fifth time that day. I still couldn't believe Ryland and I had made this. It was only a little squiggle, but it was still the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

The moment was bittersweet. Ryland should have been here with me, staring at what we created in awe. We should be experiencing all of these things together. But he still didn't know, and I didn't know when or if I could tell him.

I was scared. For so many different reasons. I didn't know what he was going to think. But even worse, I was scared that he would never let go of his need for revenge. And I couldn't bring my baby into that mess. I wouldn't.

Even still, I missed him so much it hurt to breathe. Most days, I could barely get out of bed. A month had passed since I'd seen him. A month of unending pain. I knew it wasn't good for me or the baby to be so stressed, but I couldn't help it. I hated him. I loved him. It felt like my heart was split in two. After everything, I still wanted him. But I doubted I'd ever be able to trust him again.

I picked up the photo I'd had framed of us. It was the only one I had. The night we were photographed by the paparazzi. The night he'd showed the world I was his. But he'd had an ulterior motive for doing so. Even that moment was tainted by darkness. There wasn't a single part of our relationship I could recall that wasn't. That was the way it always went with him. Pleasure and pain.

But not anymore.

I needed to put Ryland out of my mind. I needed to do what was best for me.

It was time to move on.

The landlord arched a brow at me expectantly while I took another look around the apartment. “Well?”

I clutched my purse a little tighter and gave him a stiff nod.

“I’ll take it.”

Nicole wrinkled her nose and squeezed my arm as if I’d lost my mind. “Brighton, are you sure about this?”

I gave her a weak smile and shrugged. Sure the place wasn’t the best. The walls had some cracks. And the paint was probably lead based. It kind of smelled like old socks. But it was in my budget, which was really the only determining factor at this point.

For the last month, Nicole and I had both been crashing at Matt’s cousin’s house. It was very generous of her to offer, but I knew I couldn’t stay there indefinitely. I had enough in my savings to live off of for six months if I was careful. And that meant settling for a less than stellar apartment.

“Nicole, I can’t stay at Misha’s. I need to get established somewhere of my own before the baby comes.”

“Yeah, I know,” she whispered. “But I’m pretty sure this neighborhood has like the highest murder rate in San Francisco.”

The landlord snorted and scratched his balls. “Are you gonna’ take it or what? I have other shit to do.”

“Yes,” I said again, a little more resolutely this time.

Nicole sighed and turned to the landlord, gesturing between us. “She means we’ll take it. As in both of us.”

“Nicole...”

“Nope.” She raised her hand and gave me a stern expression. “I’m coming with you. No way in hell am I letting you live in this neighborhood alone. And you’re right. I’m not working at the Bennett Corporation any more, I need to start thinking more realistically in terms of money.”

I reached over and hugged her before the landlord slapped down a lease. I knew Nicole was only doing this as a favor to me, but I was grateful nonetheless. She’d left her apartment and her job when she found out what happened, and she hadn’t spoken to Ryland since.

I didn’t know how I felt about that, but Nicole insisted it had been a long time in the making. She assured me she would have quit regardless of

the car accident, and she didn't want an apartment that wasn't rightfully hers.

The landlord cleared his throat, and we both laughed. He was already getting annoyed with us. I picked up the pen, and with a shaky hand, hovered over the dotted line. The irony wasn't lost on me that the lease was for six months. I had to swallow down my nerves as I pushed the pen to paper. The last time I'd agreed to a contract for that length of time, all hell had broken loose.

Chapter Three

Ryland

Three am.

Sleep eluded me.

The quiet whir of the ceiling fan overhead mingled with the shallow breaths dragging from my lungs. The faintest hint of *her* still lingered on the bedsheets, taunting and teasing me. I hadn't washed them since she'd gone.

Mementos of her littered my apartment. Her clothes, her jewelry, her sticky notes with reminders scrawled on them in childlike loops and swirls. I couldn't let these things go. I figured if she hadn't come back to collect yet, hope still breathed.

It was fading though. As was my control on this situation.

Every night I lingered on the edge of reality and insanity. Imagining her face brought me peace, if only for a moment. Then it always blurred into something else. Blood. Smoke. Water. Pain.

Gone.

I groped around the bed for her nightgown and brought it to my face. It still smelled like her. Strawberries and sunshine. Christ.

Smoothing the silk material through my fingers, I recalled fondly the way it slid against the decadent curves of her body. Reminisced on the pleasant sound of threads giving way as I freed her creamy flesh from its gilded cage. The bite of leather against her skin and the way she came alive for me. Marking her with arrogant ownership. She was too lenient with me sometimes, and oh what a heady fucking feeling that was. I believed her when she said she loved me. And I also believed I could still have her once I'd gotten my way.

What a fucking prig.

Self-deprecation was not an attractive quality, but that's what it'd come to. For a small while, I held an angel in the palm of my hand. Like one of those little dancers in the musical jewelry boxes. All I had to do was

wind her up and watch her shine for me. Nobody else could do that. It was all for me. And now only the memories remained.

I slid the nightgown down and wrapped it around my cock, fisting myself through the silk.

Was that judgment I heard in your thoughts? Did you forget that I was a man? This is how we deal. We could be deep in the clutches of grief and still get a fucking hard on. Blame it on biology.

It didn't mean I didn't feel things. I felt plenty. I had Brighton to thank for that. She walked into my life and blew everything to smithereens. Talk about the best laid plans...

I envisioned her spread out over my desk, her ginger spiced locks spilling over her shoulders like a flaming halo. I curled and twisted those silky threads in my hands, tugging until two bright hazel orbs stared back at me. Often, I had trouble deciphering the exact color of her eyes. They changed so frequently depending on her moods. Sometimes they were liquid amber, warm and inviting. Other times, I'd find them tinged with blue or gray. There'd been times they shut me out, but she'd never gone cold. Brighton was never, ever cold.

Right now, they were burnished caramel. Hot and sweet and filled with naughty promises. Her lids were heavy like I'd drugged her into narcosis. She was high on me-I knew-because the same drug ravaged my own veins. Thick and potent it burned as I dragged my fingers down her spine and groped her heart shaped ass.

Pure perfection. My cock itched with the need to purge this agony from my system. It was too soon. Always too soon. I smacked Brighton's pretty little ass cheek in reproof, enchanted by the tiny noise that tore from her throat. It was her fault I was in such distress. If she wasn't so goddamn exquisite, I could make it last forever.

Rough hands slid around her front, her tits filling my palms with each stuttered breath she drew. My cock dragged in and out in a measured tempo so as not to plunge from the ledge just yet. Her snug pink pussy sucked me deeper in an invitation I could not refuse. Christ she had such a pretty little pussy. If you didn't agree that pussies could be pretty, it's because you'd never seen hers. Brighton's was the prettiest.

Fucks sake, I'd reverted to a boy in the schoolyard.

Back to the fantasy. Brighton was in my debt, and nothing short of proper chastisement would do. She'd made me wait. She alone had

sentenced me to muddle through every insufferable day in her absence. Didn't she know I couldn't function without her? I wrapped my fingers around her throat and fucked her like a man possessed. If she'd forgotten how this worked, I'd be more than happy to remind her.

My eyes were nothing but vacuous pits of lust as I looked down upon her and shouted out my declarations of love and frustration. In the end, she'd cave recklessly to my every whim. We were simpatico, her and I. She loved to drip all over my cock while I tormented her. The dynamic of our connection couldn't be recreated in the most intimate of sadomasochistic relationships. It was a perfect storm of events that catalyzed this bond.

From an outside perspective, my cruel and abhorrent behavior might appear nothing more than ire wrapped in thorns. At first, perhaps it was. But Brighton's submission and thirsty demand for more forged something else. Devout worship for the creature who flirted with my darkest desires and begged them to come out and play. I was as much her servant as she was mine.

You'd probably assumed that my grief was to blame for my insanity. It wasn't entirely true. It was Brighton. She made me fucking insane. Her beauty and absolute perfection dissolved any moral boundaries that may have existed within me. She hadn't a clue that sometimes when I looked at her I could scarcely breathe. How my need for her outweighed everything else. It was the way she loved me in spite of it all that made me unable to walk away.

Misery and bliss wrestled inside of me at the silent admission and I choked out my release, spilling it across my abs like I was sixteen years old again. Pitiful. Even my cock thought so. My hand was a poor imitation of her.

I needed my light. I needed to know she was okay.

I rolled over to check my phone, and as promised, Mick had texted me every hour on the hour. There wasn't anything to report. I sent Brighton a text.

I didn't expect an answer. I never got one.

The nights were the worst of it. Not having her close, her heart beating a rhythmic tattoo across my chest. I was supposed to protect her, but instead, I'd been the one to hurt her. I couldn't stop the horrific events of that night from playing through my mind. The fear and betrayal on her face

and the stinging realization on mine. There was no forgiveness for what I'd done. I knew that. I would never forgive myself.

But this wasn't about forgiveness. It wasn't just want for her, it was vital need. She was the only antidote for the bleakness that lived inside of me. My goddess. My deity. I wasn't a believer in any religion, but I'd make an exception in this case. I'd get down on my knees and worship at her alter every day if it brought her back to me.

I couldn't take no for an answer. A better man would have. I had no claims on such titles. Causing her pain had never stopped me before. It was part of the process. I'd dole it out, and she'd accept.

This was a different kind of pain, I'd admit it. A whole different animal. So I'd indulge her some space. For now. It was generous for me. She didn't grasp how the weight of my sins crushed my chest with every passing hour. How without her, there'd never be absolution.

Brighton saw the good in everyone. She saw good in me too. I'd believe for her sake it was true, lest my darkness swallow us both whole.

I still had Brayden to compete with. There weren't enough choice words in my vocabulary to describe the many feelings I had about his weak and tarnished soul. But I wouldn't ever lay a hand on him again. For Brighton's sake.

She wouldn't believe it, but there wasn't even a question about it at this point. What happened that night couldn't be undone, but it had undone something. I'd promptly realized I was far more selfish than could be considered purposeful. Five years of planning went out the window in the presence of five minutes of her pain. Thoughts of family and revenge forgotten, I'd learned there was something I wanted more. And I almost lost it that night through my own careless actions.

I've washed my hands of evil plotting. As much as I liked to hand out punishments, I wasn't too proud to receive them when warranted. I shouldn't have tried to kill her mom and brother, maybe. I'd even felt the tiniest flicker of regret, if you can believe it. You probably don't, but who the hell gives a shit?

Brayden was digging his own grave anyway. Back in Chicago, he'd hooked up with the usual shady contacts. Did you expect anything more from an ex-con? Okay, let me rephrase that. Did you expect anything more from the son of Frank Gallo?

I sure as hell didn't.

Still, I wondered if Brighton knew what he was up to. Or if she'd sent him to the same special purgatory that was reserved for me. Silence.

I only hoped Brayden didn't go digging up old dirt. Nothing good could come of that. Frankie's associates had been well and truly paid off, but I trusted them about as much as believed in unicorns. What they did to Brayden was of little consequence to me, but if they ever came after Brighton, they'd have a different beast to contend with.

I was the son of Michael Lockhart, but there were vast differences between him and I. Unlike Michael, I wasn't afraid to protect the woman I loved. I'd single-handedly go to war and burn their whole organization to the ground before I ever let them harm what was mine. And there were no two ways about it-Brighton would always be mine.

Chapter Four

Brighton

We'd spent the weekend moving.

And by moving, I meant Nicole's stuff. Because I'd left all of my meager belongings at Rylands. Nicole was nice enough to let me borrow her clothes in the meantime, but that wasn't going to work forever. My belly had already grown, and soon I would need some real maternity clothes.

I bought a second hand sewing machine on Craigslist for that very purpose. It wasn't a Singer, but I would take what I could get. Nicole and I continued to work on our project, and it was quickly expanding into something even bigger than I could have ever imagined. Once Nicole put her mind to something, she was truly unstoppable.

I really needed to find a real job though. I'd been pouring all of my spare time into sewing, and as much as I loved it, I had to be realistic. Everything was going to change in six months, and I needed to be financially prepared for that. Luckily for me, Matt said he might be able to help me out. He'd organized for me to talk to the owner of the dive bar where his waitress friend worked. They had an open position for a server, which wasn't ideal, but it was a place to start. I was heading there this afternoon.

"You want me to drive you?" Nicole asked as I glanced at myself in the mirror.

Even with the flared waist of my dress, you could still see a little baby bump if you looked close enough. I chewed on my lip, and Nicole grinned.

"You look fine, Brighton. They won't even notice."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Now get your butt in the car, or we're going to be late."

I followed her out of the apartment and to her car. It still felt weird every time I got into it, like I was breaking one of Ryland's rules. I understood why he had that rule now. He was afraid of me getting into a crash.

Again, with the irony.

Nicole cruised down the street and punched the automatic door locks when we hit a red light. I didn't blame her in this neighborhood, and it only added to my stress about what I was going to do. This wasn't somewhere I wanted to raise a baby, but what choice did I have? Things weren't any better back at Norma's, and there was no way I'd let my baby grow up around that.

I needed to get my shit together, and quick.

"So Matt set this up?" Nicole asked, tapping her fingers against the steering wheel as she waited for the light to change.

"Yeah, it was really nice of him. I hope I get it."

"Me too." She gave me a weak smile. "But how did he even know about this job?"

There was something weird in her voice, and I started fidgeting with my cardigan. I didn't want to upset her, but I didn't want to lie either.

"He knows one of the waitresses there."

She nodded, as though I only confirmed what she already knew. Her entire posture changed, and she got that faraway look in her eyes.

"We should meet up with him this week," I suggested. "I know he'd love to see you."

It took Nicole a minute to realize I was talking to her. "What?" she blinked. "Oh, yeah, sure. We could do that."

Twenty minutes later, we walked inside the bar.

Nicole went and ordered a drink while I asked for the owner. He was an older gentleman by the name of David, and he put me at ease right away.

"Why don't you have a seat, Brighton." He gestured to the bar. "We can do a quick interview before the lunch crowd hits."

I took a seat and David brought over a piece of paper with some questions scrawled across it. Luckily for me, they were all easy to answer, and I lied through my teeth. I told him I'd waitressed before, which wasn't

my finest moment, but I really needed this job. After five minutes, he set the paper down and gave me a grin.

“Well, Matt was right. I think you’ll do just fine. When can you start?”

I tried to contain my glee as I smiled back at him. “Whenever you need me to.”

“Okay, how about tomorrow night then? Six o’clock.”

I stood up and shook his hand. “Thanks David. Thank you so much.”

That night I texted Matt to tell him how grateful I was.

And then, as I curled into bed, I performed my evening ritual of reading through the texts Ryland sent me throughout the day. I still hadn’t found the courage to change my phone number. It was the last connection I had to him, and there was still a piece of me that just couldn’t let that go. But I would only ever allow myself to look at his texts once, and it was always at night before I went to sleep.

I scrolled through the screen and tried to keep my emotional armor on while I read his usual messages.

*Baby girl.
Please talk to me.*

*I’m thinking of you right now.
I won’t tell you what, but just know
that if you were here,
You’d be sore as hell tomorrow.*

*I love you, Brighton.
I’m not giving up on us.*

I closed my eyes and released a shaky breath. Every day, it was the same version of texts. He told me how much he missed me. Begged me to talk to him. And then, professed how much he loved me. He wasn't shy about saying that at all now. But we still hadn't really spoken about what happened.

He swore he was done with his revenge. That he fucked up, and he didn't want to lose me. I wanted so badly to believe him. But he'd lied to me before, and I didn't just have myself to think about anymore.

So I resorted to my heartbreaking ritual of typing out the same words I did every night. The message that I could never actually send.

I love you Ryland.

I glanced over my shoulder as I walked out of the doctor's office and frowned. The same guy I'd seen earlier was still there, leaning against the brick wall. He was smoking a cigarette, his eyes scanning up and down the street. It was probably just a coincidence, but I could have sworn I saw him the week before too. And that was on the other side of the city.

"What's the matter?" Nicole whispered.

"It's just that guy," I answered. "I don't know, I thought I saw him last week around Misha's place. And he's been out here the whole time I was in my appointment. Am I being crazy paranoid?"

He looked at us, and I could have sworn guilt flickered across his face. There was something familiar about him. A hazy image of the man who cut the airbag in the car popped into my head, but I couldn't place him now. Was this the same guy? He was huge. Like body builder type huge. Dark hair and dark appraising eyes. Nothing in particular about him stood out, apart from the fact that he was dressed in a nice suit. It was odd for this neighborhood.

"I don't know." Nicole tugged on my arm. "But let's not stick around to find out."

We walked down the street, and when I glanced back over my shoulder, he was gone. Matt met us at a café around the corner, buying us both a hot chocolate and a muffin for lunch.

“So?” he raised his brows. “How did it go?”

“Good.” I nodded. “I’m not scheduled to have an ultrasound for a while, but I just wanted to get established with the doctor.”

“Gotcha.” Matt looked confused. This was definitely not his department.

“Sooo...” He swung his gaze to Nicole. “Misha said you were moving out?”

Nicole and I both looked at each other. We hadn’t really planned on how we were going to break the news to Matt.

“What is it?” he asked.

“We are moving out.” Nicole fiddled with a packet of sugar, her eyes looking everywhere but at him. “Brighton and I got an apartment together. In fact, we moved this weekend.”

“Oh.” Matt’s tone dropped. “Where at?”

“Well, I think for now, it would be best if nobody else knew.”

Matt narrowed his eyes and worked his jaw. He definitely wasn’t happy about this. At all.

“Nicole...”

“I’m not accountable to you,” she cut him off. “I don’t have to tell you where I’m at or what I’m doing.”

I shot her a pleading glance. I knew she wasn’t telling him because he would worry, but this wasn’t the way to go about it. She was only pushing him further away.

“Right.” He stood up and set down his unfinished coffee. “I get it, Nicole. I was just trying to look out for you. As a friend. Because that’s what friends do. But I guess I had it all wrong.”

Her lip wobbled, but she didn’t say another word. So Matt walked out the door.

I collapsed onto my bed with a sigh. Today had been exhausting already, and I still had to work in an hour. I was nervous as hell.

Working as a receptionist was easy for me because it took minimal coordination. Waitressing on the other hand... I didn’t know how I was going to handle it. But how hard could it be?

My phone chimed. I was afraid to even look at it, but I couldn't resist.

Missing you, baby girl.

The office isn't the same without you.

They were Ryland's usual texts. But as I scrolled down, I noticed there were a lot more today. And panic set in when I realized why.

*Why were you at the doctor, Brighton?
What's wrong?*

*Don't punish me this way.
I need to know you're okay.*

Please, baby girl.

I stopped reading. I knew he'd be freaking out and thinking the worst. It hurt me, but I couldn't break my rule. I couldn't text him back. Because that would be opening a door I wouldn't be able to close again. And I needed to be more concerned about the fact that he knew what I was doing.

It was that guy loitering outside of the building, it had to be.

I needed to be more careful. The last thing I wanted was for Ryland to figure out where I was living.

Chapter Five

Ryland

Unfuckingbelievable.

Did you know that science has actually proved swearing to be cathartic? Wonder how much it cost to figure that one out. I could've told them for free.

Brighton was poking the beast inside of me with her invisible stick. Would it be hypocritical to say that I didn't like her keeping secrets from me? I'd tasted my own medicine, and it was bitter. So very bitter.

Still, she knew how I handled this kind of shit. I didn't. Something was wrong, and she hadn't cracked her code of silence after any of my various texts. My frustration bled through the messages the longer this act of rebellion carried on. Usually a good dose of my cantankerous attitude would do the trick. Brighton didn't like confrontation. She didn't like anyone to worry. She was always so goddamned concerned about everybody but herself. Often, I could twist that in my favor, because... well, let's be frank, a man such as myself needed her reassurances. But this time she wasn't giving them. Cruel and unusual punishment, I'd say.

She'd know someone on my payroll was keeping an eye on her now. What did it matter? Brighton should know my M.O. Mick wasn't just following her around for information. He was there to keep her safe. It was what I liked to call compromise. But I only had so much patience, and she'd just stretched it to the limit.

"Why didn't you follow her inside?" I blared through the phone.

"She was onto me," Mick rumbled. "You said not to get too close."

"So you lost her completely?" My indignation was not well hidden.

"I thought you didn't want me to scare her."

Ah, touché Mick. Pulling out that old fucking chestnut. No, I didn't want him to scare her. And if she had any recollection of who he was, she probably would be scared.

"Not happy, Mick." I rocked back in my chair and squinted at the bottle of Macallan across the room. I knew what I'd be doing as soon as this call was finished.

"I know, boss."

"How many doctors are in that building?"

"A lot, sir."

I could probably get her medical records. Eventually. But I'd need to know the doctor first. And if Brighton ever found out, she'd lay into me with a whole speech about 'right and wrong'. I hardly needed to supply extra reasons to hate me, so I'd put it on hold. For now.

"Oh, hang on. There's something else, sir."

I reached for the marble paperweight Brighton held in her hand on that first day, smoothing the pad of my finger over the inky blackness. If I didn't know her so well, I would've wondered what it was that drew her to it.

"What is it?" I asked absently.

"That bar she was at yesterday?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I had a hunch, so I've been hanging around the place. And she just came back here."

"With who?" I perked up.

"She's by herself," he said. "But she looks like she's wearing a uniform."

"A uniform?"

Oh, Jesus Christ, Brighton.

I was up out of my chair before I'd even fully processed his words. "Wait for me in the parking lot. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Chapter Six

Brighton

My first night at work was not going that great.

I kept messing up orders and forgetting everything. What Nicole affectionately deemed my ‘pregnancy brain’ was going to cost me my job if I wasn’t careful.

I knew David was already losing his patience with me. I kept apologizing, but he’d ended up having to comp two tables’ meals already. At this rate I probably wouldn’t even have a paycheck.

I’d hoped to be eased into it, but the place was completely packed out. It was a little more overwhelming than I expected, and my feet were already killing me. But I plastered a smile on my face and told myself I could cry later when I was home in the safety of my bed.

“Hey!” Some guy in one of the booths snapped his fingers at me. “Where the hell is our food?”

Shit.

I glanced down at my pad of paper and realized I’d never put their order in. And this was the second time he’d asked me about it.

“It’ll be out soon.” I gave him a shaky smile. I was going to lose it any minute now.

“That’s what you said ten minutes ago,” he bellowed.

He was obviously drunk, and very hungry. And now he was pissed at me. His dark eyes narrowed when I just stood there, unable to conjure up the words I needed.

“Are you retarded?” he barked. “Do you speak English? WHERE’S. MY. FUCKING. FOO...”

The moment the last syllable flew from his mouth, a fist slammed across his jaw. I stumbled backwards and bumped into a table when Ryland swung his gaze from the man he just punched back to me.

I had no idea where he’d even come from, or how the hell he knew I was here. But his eyes were glazed with ice and his voice deadly calm when

he gestured towards me.

“Apologize to my girlfriend.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but the guy in the booth cut me off as he stood up and slammed his palms against Ryland’s chest.

Ryland held his ground, looking scarier than I’d ever seen him-in a suit and tie no less. His face hadn’t been shaved in what looked like a week. Dark circles marred his normally beautiful eyes and his jaw seemed more prominent than I remembered. And yet, his chest heaved with the force of adrenaline, like he was looking forward to pummeling this guy. Like he needed to purge himself of his darkness. I’d seen it happen a thousand times, but never in this way. He was solid and strong and completely unshakable.

The guy he’d punched spat blood out of his mouth before a crazy grin spread across his face.

“Your girlfriend’s a fucking idiot...”

Again, he was cut off by Ryland’s fist. I squeezed my eyes shut and buried my face in my shirt as I heard his body crumple to the ground. I knew he was out cold this time.

I darted back towards the kitchen, but a hand wrapped around my arm and stopped me.

“You’re coming with me,” Ryland clipped out.

“I’m not going anywhere with...”

“It’s cute how you think you have a choice.”

He grabbed my hand and tugged me along behind him. Everyone in the bar was dead quiet as they watched the show, including David. I was humiliated.

“Ryland,” I hissed. “Let go of me.”

“What’s going on here?” David asked.

“You can consider this her resignation,” Ryland informed him.

I panicked and shook my head. “That’s not true, David. I’m so sorry about all of this. Could I just have one minute, please?”

David gave me a sympathetic glance and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Brighton. But this isn’t going to work out.”

I nodded and gave him a watery smile. I’d never been fired from a job before, and I was absolutely mortified. Ryland walked on, pulling me along with him, and I didn’t resist this time. But as soon as we were in the parking lot, I jerked away from him.

“I hate you!” I spat. “How dare you come in here and pull that crap. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Tears streamed down my face, and Ryland didn’t look the least bit guilty. He tried to pull me back into his arms. I wouldn’t let him. No way could I allow that. I wasn’t strong enough to fight the comfort he provided right now.

“Brighton, you can’t work here,” he stated. “Let me take care of you. You have a card, I want you to use it. I’ll pay your rent, whatever you want. Just tell me where you’re living...”

“You mean you don’t know that already?” I accused. “I know you’re having me followed.”

He tightened his jaw and looked away. “You make it sound so...”

“What?” I interrupted. “Crazy? Because it is crazy, Ryland.”

“It’s for your own safety,” he said. “I’m worried about you.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” I insisted. “And I’m not going to humor these tactics of yours just to put you at ease. You need to let me go, Ryland.”

He looked like I’d slapped him as his eyes fell on mine. “I can never let you go, Brighton.”

“You have to,” I croaked.

“No.” He shook his head. “I know that isn’t what you really want. I can see it on your face, baby girl. So why are you still pushing me away?”

I couldn’t answer him. Because my reasons wouldn’t sound convincing enough with the mood I was in. My resolve was already wavering after being in his presence for five minutes. What the hell was wrong with me?

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Let me take you home.”

“No.”

“Brighton...”

“No,” I said again. “I’ll have Nicole come and get me.”

“Then I’ll wait with you.”

“I don’t want you to!” I scrubbed my hands over my face. “Can’t you understand that, Ryland? I don’t want you here. I don’t want anything else from you. So just go!”

His eyes filled with pain, and I had to tear mine away. I couldn’t look at him. I knew I was hurting him, but it was necessary. It was the only way I could truly do this.

“If that’s what you really want...”

“It is what I want,” I assured him in a shaky voice.

He nodded and gave me one last glance before he walked away.

Chapter Seven

Ryland

There had been times over the years-during the rise of my career-when I needed a man without a whole lot of scruples. Though I preferred to grind most axes myself, some things in the business world simply weren't done this way. There was an entire invisible rule book one must abide by. It involved bandwagons, fire and brimstone, horses' mouths, and so on and so forth. All very secret society type stuff. I wouldn't bore you with the details, and you probably wouldn't believe me anyhow.

But the next time you cross paths with a CEO richer than God, you look him in the eyes and tell me if you still feel the same. It was a cutthroat world, and I was just living in it. The competition was fierce, and if you thought the things I did were bad, you should see some of the other guys. I looked like the virgin fucking Mary in comparison.

There wasn't an ounce of pleasure in underhanded business tactics. Frankly, I'd prefer to get by on something I'd built off my own back. What pride could there be in something not earned through blood, sweat and tears? These notions were all well and good in theory. But from the moment I launched my company, I had a giant thorn in my side by the name of Alex Burton. He'd been out to sabotage me from the word go. You thought I was a prick? Wait until you met this one.

Anyway, my point was there were times when he'd backed me into a corner and tried to hand me the Vaseline. Alex Burton didn't fight fair. And as I explained before, I had a whole motto about fucking other people before they fucked you first.

But this one was sly, and, well quite frankly he'd bested me several times over. Not because he was more intelligent by any means. Not because he tossed around smarmy smiles like dinner mints at an all you can eat buffet. No, it was because Alex was the son of Robert Burton. Otherwise known as the master of deceptive business practices. Michael had taught me

a lot about business, and almost all of it did me not a lick of good. I'd learned everything on my own in the school of hard knocks.

I wasn't about to let some over-privileged snot nose WASP come in and take it from me. So this was where Mick came in.

Where did I find the six foot six hulking behemoth, you may ask?

Good question.

Would you believe me if I told you I found him trying to hot-wire my car after he'd broken into it?

I shit you not. There he was, ever so smoothly sitting in my fucking Jaguar like he owned the goddamn thing.

I was actually quite impressed with his balls. Not that I'd ever seen them, but you get the point. Even more impressive was the fact that he'd managed to break into it without setting off the alarm. Yeah, I know... it looks so easy in the movies. But it's really not. There isn't a hundred-thousand-dollar price tag on these beasts only to be equipped with kiddie security systems.

So, Mick intrigued me.

It was obvious he was homeless, so I invited him to take up residence on my sofa. Don't go mistaking me for a philanthropist now-it was solely for my benefit. I saw something in Mick that could be of use to me. And soon enough, I knew exactly what that was.

Ex-special forces, Mick had racked up more medals and accolades than a homecoming queen in a high school yearbook. Raised on the streets of Detroit, he'd pulled himself out of the gutter and did everything a good soldier was supposed to. He'd made a life for himself in the face of adversity. It wasn't until he was serving his glorious country overseas that the news came which would forever change his course.

His young and beautiful wife had been raped and murdered in their own home. I'll spare you the gory details of everything that happened next, but it's not too difficult to guess. The crackpot justice system failed Mick, so he took matters into his own hands. Though they'd never been able to prove it, he'd gutted his wife's rapist like a fish.

Told you we had something in common, no? Okay, so maybe I'd never taken a life. But Mick and I, we understood each other. The only difference was once it was all said and done for him, he'd found himself at the bottom of a bottle. You already know how I felt about that. So I

promptly sent him off to the best of rehabs and told him to get his fucking shit together. I had a new purpose for him.

Mick got on board with no resistance whatsoever. When he learned about my family, he was eager to help. It was nice-that sense of comradery. The idea that we were just two vigilante enforcers out to settle old beefs. But he drew the line when it came to hurting women, understandably so. He was the closest thing I had to a friend, even though I was technically his employer. Still, we'd been on shaky ground since that horrible night he'd discovered Brighton in the car. I didn't quite know how to make amends for that either. Because while I gave the order, Mick was the follow through. His was the conscience that had to live with his actions though I doubted he could possibly feel any worse than me.

I had very few people in my life who held me accountable for my actions, but Mick did. I respected him for that. I respected that he had enough morals not to cross certain lines, and to give me the appropriate doses of verbal reprimand when I needed them. I'd failed her, it was true. However, what Mick couldn't see was that my every move thereafter was to prevent it from happening again.

His face was impassive as I studied him. The marble paperweight sailed to and fro in my palms, the ebb and flow of its mass anchoring me. Mick appeared every bit the oaf upon first glance, but there was a lot more lurking beneath the surface than you'd expect. He was a gentle giant, but also a deadly one. I didn't inspire a lick of fear in him, but he bowed to me nonetheless. There were certain things he felt he owed, but it wasn't why he stuck around.

We had an odd relationship, I'd be the first to admit it. Two vacant souls in a desolate sink hole. He respected me. At least I had that going for me. He didn't want to disappoint the man who'd pulled him from the brink of self-destruction. But he was also hiding things from me. What did I tell you about the size of his balls?

Anticipation was as powerful a motivator as fear, in my humble opinion. Hm. I take that back. Humble, I was not. I was an arrogant fuck who only wanted one goddamn thing in this world, and right now the man in front of me was an obstacle to that, no matter how righteous his intentions.

"You see, Mick..." I drew out the words, keeping my voice tight and in control so he knew I was being completely rational. "The thing is, I

don't like to blow my own horn. But I excelled in math. Still do, in fact. It comes easily to me. Some people, not so much. It's a gift."

Mick shifted in his chair and arched a brow at me. "Not quite sure what you're getting at boss."

"What I'm getting at is that the shit you're peddling me doesn't add up, your story has more holes than Swiss cheese, and your smoke and mirrors are better left to the kiddies."

His face blanched, and he had the decency to look the slightest bit remorseful.

"I know she's a beautiful girl." I set down the paperweight and leaned forward on my elbows. "Sweet. Funny. Charming as hell."

Mick smirked, but wisely chose not to respond.

"She's mine."

There was no argument about that, and I waited for Mick's reaction. I doubted the big lug had actually developed feelings for her. But there was certainly something amiss, and it was time to dispense with the monkey business.

"I'm fully aware of that, sir," he assured me.

His eyes crinkled in amusement and it relieved me to know that wasn't going to be an issue. Out of a handful of people I trusted, Mick made the top of the list. Even smaller was the list of those-apart from myself-I deemed capable of protecting Brighton. That score consisted of one, and he was it. He excelled at what he did, but having fuzzy warmth for my girl wasn't going to fly.

"So it's the guilt, then," I remarked.

Mick looked away, and bingo! We had a winner.

"She wasn't supposed to be in the car that night," he mumbled.

"You think I'm not blatantly aware of that by now?" I snapped.

"I know you are, boss." He glanced at me with concern. I hated that look. Except on Brighton. My little lotus flower could worry her pretty face over me all day long. In fact, a dose of that would be well received right about now. Much better than her cavalier indifference to the useless bag of bones I was becoming.

I was a little bit of a masochist myself as evidenced by my next question. "You think I should give her up?"

Mick blinked at me and sawed his teeth over his bottom lip before answering. "I know you love her, boss. But don't you think enough damage

has been done?”

“You know what I think?” I shot laser beams into his murky brown eyes. “I think I’m not paying you to have a fucking opinion.”

Mick grunted in response. So frigging typical.

“I need you on her at all times,” I barked out. “I need to know she’s safe, if nothing else. And if I find out you’re withholding her address from me on purpose...”

My email pinged. There were few matters worthy of disrupting this conversation with my old buddy, old pal. The exception, of course, was the private investigator in Chicago. In this case, no news would’ve been good news.

Mick forgotten, I opened it up without delay. I hated being right. Photos of Brayden occupied my screen and exacerbated my animosity towards my love’s darker half. While I signed over monthly checks to keep the twins alive, he’d inflamed old wounds by getting reacquainted with Frankie’s old neighborhood.

Christ.

He was even dumber than I gave him credit for, and this was about to complicate the shit out of everything I thought I’d buried.

I hadn’t a clue when I made a deal with the devil six years ago it’d come back to haunt me like this. Alfredo had been paid enough to wash his hands of the matter until a more suitable time. Out of sight, out of mind. But not when Brayden was parading himself all over Frankie’s old stomping grounds with a giant red target on his back. The two paths would collide, sooner or later.

Alfredo would put a bullet in his head without a second thought, money be damned. And then what? Would they try to come for Brighton too?

“We’ll pick this up later, Mick.”

He didn’t say a word as he slinked out the door. I reached for the photo proudly displayed on my desk. The only personal touch in my office, I must have looked at it a hundred times a day. She was so goddamn lovely.

My little ray of sunshine.

She didn’t believe it, but she was still as pure in my mind as she ever had been. And nobody was going to take her away from me.

Nobody.

Chapter Eight

Brighton

“Are you sure you want to do this today?” Nicole asked as I flitted around and checked the clothing racks one last time.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “I still can’t believe how much work you put into this Nicole. This is really going to be amazing.”

“You did all of the hard work,” she said. “I just organized.”

“Are you kidding me? You raised more money than I ever thought possible. You turned this into a real charity. Because of you, hundreds of little girls are going to get to realize their dreams.”

“Because of Sophia,” she corrected.

She gave me a bittersweet smile as I glanced at the placard she’d had created for the foundation. Sophia’s Shoes. A nonprofit that would provide underprivileged children the opportunity to participate in ballet.

While it may have been a small kindness to the world, it was something I was incredibly proud of. One of the only good things I’d ever really accomplished in my life, I was committed to seeing the foundation grow and prosper.

The event organizer who’d volunteered her time strode up, looking completely professional in her black skirt suit as she glanced at her watch.

“It’s time,” she announced. “Shall we ladies?”

Nicole and I glanced at each other and smiled nervously as we walked towards the stage. The doors drew open and a hundred little girls and their parents spilled into the room, filling it with laughter and light. They all took their seats and bounced around happily as they waited.

The event organizer took to the podium first, thanking everyone for coming and making her introduction.

“And now, if you’ll all give a big round of applause for the creators of this lovely foundation, Miss Brighton Valentine and Nicole Baker.”

We both walked up to the podium, and I fidgeted while Nicole spoke first. Though she claimed to be just as nervous, she was a little better at this stuff than I was. I was happy to sit back and remain in the shadows,

but she insisted this was something I needed to do. Something we needed to do together.

I barely heard her speech before she handed the microphone to me, and I cleared my throat as I tried to keep myself together.

“Thank you,” I stumbled over the words. “Um, thank you again for coming today. This project is something that started small. In memory of a little girl whose life was cut short...”

My eyes filled with tears and I had to pause for a moment as Nicole sniffled beside me. “This is obviously something that is very bittersweet, and while I never had a chance to meet Sophia Lockhart, I do hope this foundation will do her memory justice...”

My words trailed off as I connected to a pair of blue eyes in the audience staring back at me. They were overflowing with more emotion and pain than I’d ever seen before, and I nearly choked as I tried to wrap it up.

“So if you will please follow the instructions on your cards, and the lovely ladies at the tables will help you to get signed up.”

Nicole pried the microphone from my hand and turned it off, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Ryland. I hadn’t heard from him in over two weeks. As much as I’d told him that was what I wanted, it was a complete lie. I missed him so much. And now, without even his texts to fill the void, my world was emptier than it had ever been.

“What’s he doing here?” Nicole whispered. “How did he find out?”

I couldn’t reply. My throat burned, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the glassiness of his. His hands balled into fists at his sides, and I felt like I was betraying him somehow. I started to question everything that I was doing when he walked from the room without another glance.

“It’s okay,” Nicole’s voice wobbled. “It’s better this way. He needs time to process it. It’s good that he’s not here.”

Chapter Nine

Ryland

Whiskey annihilation.

The articles blurred together, and I took deep satisfaction in that. I had no inclination to keep reading them. To keep dredging up these horrible... *emotions*? And yet I was impressed with the publicity Nicole garnered for the event. She'd never worked so hard on any project I'd given her over the years.

She was dedicated to the cause. I was dedicated to seeing this bottle of Johnnie Walker dry by sunrise. It was Brighton who thought of this. She'd hit me right in the tiny fissure of my armor. Hell if I knew how she kept doing that. The million-dollar question was to love or hate her for it.

Course, I loved her for it, sap that I was.

So typical of the little peach, trying to make amends for the sins of her father. It couldn't be done. Nothing would bring Sophia back. Only death could purge those last moments from my mind. Relax Freud, I wasn't referring to her fucking cockroach of a brother. I was talking about myself. And no, I wasn't suicidal either.

But goddammit if she didn't make me question it sometimes. The gaping Brighton-shaped hole she'd left in my life couldn't be patched up with a first aid kit or any amount of aged whiskey. The Montagues and Capulets had nothing on us. Star crossed lovers, were we doomed from the start?

I couldn't accept that. I'd write her odes upon odes if she wanted me to. They'd be pitiful, of course. I could open up to her. Allow her a glimpse of my pain this time. She'd feed from it, because she thought she could fix me.

She'd always believe there was light in the darkness. That was my angel. Even when she was on her knees-filled with my darkness-she was still shining bright. My Siren's song, my exposed nerve. She lured me in and made me feel. And then she left me to perish.

Christ, I needed her right now. Fear had come-a-knocking, whispering that I mightn't ever have her again. It was bound to bring on childish antics and tantrums of epic proportions the longer she kept this charade up.

There was no way I could just let her go. The last time I'd even entertained such a hellish notion popped into my head. She'd wrecked her bracelet and coaxed my personal demons from their shadowy lairs. The terror on my face that day was irrefutable, and I'd shown my hand before I intended. So, I did what any self-respecting male would do in my situation. I pouted. She came to me on her own that time-on her knees, no less. It only took my silence to bring her back.

I contemplated if it'd work now. Chances weren't good. I'd fucked up plenty of times in my life (shocking, I know), but this was uncharted territory. How do you get someone to forgive the unspeakable? How do you even look at yourself knowing you almost killed the woman you love?

I couldn't tell you exactly, I'd been avoiding my reflection since it'd happened.

She was slipping through my fingers. A tiny dot in the ocean, I stood helpless on the shore and watched her drift away. I didn't have a life vest, but I'd swim to her if she'd let me.

If she'd let me?

Jesus H. Christ. Were you listening to this shit? When did I become *that* guy? Ten months ago, I'd taken her without apology. Laid down the rules and staked my claim like the selfish prick I was.

You see? You see what she did to me?

Fucks sake. She'd turned me into a pussy. Spouting poetic nonsense at four in the frigging morning. Someone get me a handgun so I could cease with the dramatics.

Swiveling around in my chair, I kicked my heels up on the desk. I was just drunk enough not to care about the marks. Rocking back and forth, the creaking of leather filled the stark silence of the office where I spent entirely too much time.

The way I saw it, I had one of two choices. Go in guns blazing, or slow and cautious. While guns blazing always worked in the past, I wasn't certain it'd play out in my favor this time. No doubt about it, Brighton enjoyed the dominant and even slightly sadistic parts of me. She expected them. But perhaps that tactic was doing more harm than good at this point.

I'd show her it didn't always have to be that way. I could bend. A little. Maybe. Okay, I'd try.

Better?

I retrieved my phone and scrolled through the contacts until I found my publicist. Sophia's Shoes was important to Brighton. Possibly, it was important to me too. I hadn't a strong opinion on that yet. Either way, I'd throw everything I had at this.

Chapter Ten

Brighton

It had been a week since I'd last seen him. The hole in my heart was growing bigger every day, along with our baby.

I didn't know if this pain was ever going to end, but I wished it would. I wished that I could forget him. That I could just stop loving him. A part of me wondered if him and Brayden were still trying to tear each other apart, but I wouldn't let myself think about it. I couldn't. It wasn't safe, and it wasn't healthy.

So when my phone rang, and it registered Brayden's number, I didn't pick up. Since I'd been released from the hospital, the only person I wanted to talk to was Nicole.

The phone went to voicemail, only to start ringing again. And again. And by the fourth time, I couldn't ignore the tightness in my chest as I answered.

"Hello?"

"Brighton," Brayden breathed a sigh of relief. "Please don't hang up."

"I'm not," I said quietly. "Not yet, anyway."

"I know things have been crazy. And I know you don't want to hear this, but you need to."

I sighed and rubbed my tired eyes. "What is it?"

"Norma-Jean has been missing for over a month now," he said. "I think... I think Ryland might have..."

"Just stop," I grated. "Don't finish that sentence."

Brayden did as I requested though I could tell by his breathing he was irritated.

"How do you know she's missing?" I asked calmly. Too calmly. I was getting far too used to calls of this nature.

"Because I haven't heard from her," he groused. "Her phone's disconnected, and nobody else has seen her either."

“She said she was staying with a cousin in Springfield.” My voice was light though the feeling in my gut wasn’t as positive.

“Yeah, I’ve talked to her,” Brayden replied. “She said she was there for a week and then she split. Hasn’t heard from her since.”

I wrung my hands together as I paced back and forth in the tiny apartment I shared with Nicole. After paying the rent for the next six months in advance, I’d been living off fumes. I didn’t have enough money to get to Illinois. I would have borrowed the money from Nicole if I could, but she didn’t have it either. We were both in the same boat, and it was sinking fast.

But there was one option, even though I didn’t want to use it.

I pulled out the credit card with both Ryland’s name and mine printed on it and glared at it for a long pause.

“Are you still there?” Brayden asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I hung up the phone and started to look at flights. As I typed the credit card number into the payment box, I told myself that even if I had to start scrubbing toilets for a living, I would find a way to pay it back.

When I walked down to the curb an hour later, I was shocked as hell to see Ted standing there as if he were waiting for me.

“What are you doing here?” I glanced around suspiciously.

“Mr. Bennett isn’t here,” he said quickly, and obviously under instruction. “But he sent me to see that you are escorted to see your mother safely.”

“Excuse me?” I winced. “But how...”

The credit card.

Of course he knew what I was booking the flight for. And if he didn’t have my address before, I’d just handed it to him on a silver platter. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Where is she?” I demanded.

Ted held up his hands in mock surrender. “I can assure you, she’s safe and sound. I’m only here to drive you, Miss Valentine. So if you’ll please get in the car...”

I crossed my arms and glared. “How do I know I can trust you to take me to her?”

Poor Ted didn’t stand a chance against my hormones or my emotions today.

“I guess you don’t know for certain,” he admitted. “But I give you my word, if that makes any difference.”

He looked so distraught that I’d lashed out at him that I felt a little bad. So reluctantly, I climbed into the car.

“Okay, but I swear to you Ted, if I see Ryland, I have the police on speed dial.”

“I don’t doubt that, Miss.” He bowed his head and shut the door.

Like the handful of other times he’d driven me, he put on some soothing classical music. It did nothing to calm me as I bounced my knee up and down on the leather seat impatiently. We drove through the city and started to wind our way into a more suburban area where the houses became fewer and farther apart. It was making me nervous, and I clutched my phone as I called out to Ted.

“This isn’t the way to the airport.”

“No, Miss Valentine, it isn’t,” he replied calmly. “Your mother is here in California. Please, just be patient.”

Being patient was the last thing I wanted to do. And Norma in California? I was going to have to see it to believe it. But I held on for a little longer, at least until we pulled up to a gated area of some sort of mansion in the hills.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Ted didn’t hear me as he spoke into the intercom. Whatever he said caused the gate to swing open, and he drove right on through. The car stopped in a circular drive surrounded by greenery and an ornate water fountain out the front. Whatever this place was, it was too big to be a house, but it didn’t look like a hotel either. Ted got out to open my door and gestured me towards the large glass doors at the top of the staircase.

“I’ll be waiting here for you Miss.”

“But... I don’t even know what this place is,” I protested.

A strange woman walked by and gave me a little wave, followed by a few other people I didn’t recognize. They were all dressed in nice clothing, but there was a weird vibe about the whole place that made me hesitate.

“I’m under instruction to deliver you here,” Ted explained. “And to wait as long as you need.”

Clearly, he didn’t know what was going on either. So I wrapped my cardigan around myself with a huff and walked up the large stone stairs, pushing open the glass door. It resembled a luxury hotel inside, with a large reception desk right at the front. I walked up nervously and a woman with blonde hair and a friendly smile greeted me.

“Can I help you?”

“Um, I’m not really sure,” I said. “I’m here to see Norma-Jean Richmond.”

“Ah, of course.” She tapped away at the computer. “I’ll call her down for you.”

I stood awkwardly off to the side, not really sure what to expect while I waited. As I looked around, I saw more faces I didn’t recognize, but eventually there was one I did. It was an actual celebrity from a reality TV show.

I tried to keep my mouth from dropping open when he winked at me and sauntered by.

“He’s a looker, huh?” Norma’s voice interrupted from behind me. “A real nice guy too.”

I spun around in shock and thought the floor was about to give out on me. Because there in front of me was my mother, but I hardly recognized her.

In place of her sunken eyes, two vibrant green orbs stared back at me. Her skin had a strange glow to it, and I could almost swear even some of her wrinkles had disappeared. Her hair was shiny, and instead of being styled into its usual rat’s nest, it fell in soft waves around her shoulders. But it was the extra fifteen pounds added to her frame that really had me doing a double take.

Not to mention the clothes she was wearing. Gone were the cheap white heels and too large jeans. There wasn’t a frill in site on her beige sweatshirt or khaki pants. She looked like a... well, like a mom.

“What happened to you?” I blurted.

“What’s the matter?” she chuckled. “Don’t recognize your old mother?”

There was a kindness in her eyes I hadn’t seen in years, and an evenness in her voice I’d never heard at all. I opened my mouth but nothing

came out. She understood that I was in shock as she gripped me by the arm and gently led me away.

“Let’s go out to the garden,” she suggested. “Get some fresh air.”

I followed her soundlessly, the wheels turning in my brain as I tried to come to grips with whatever horrible thing Ryland had done to my mother. But no matter which way I spun it, I couldn’t process it.

Norma helped me to sit down in a deck chair before taking a seat in one across from me. The scent of flowers and fresh water invaded my nostrils, and I was sure the garden was beautiful, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Norma.

“I’m clean,” she began, folding her hands across her lap like a proper lady. “One month. I know it’s not much, and I still have a long way to go, but it’s a start.”

“This is where you’ve been for the last month?” I looked around again, finally understanding this was a rehab center. One that, from the looks of it, must have cost a fortune.

“It sure is.” She laughed. “Can you believe it? Me living amongst the rich and famous?”

“But... how?”

“Ryland,” she said quietly.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“Language,” she scolded.

“Oh c’mon Norma,” I retorted. “Don’t start acting like a mother now.”

She flinched from my words, and I mentally slapped myself, feeling like the worst daughter in the world.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just... I didn’t expect this, and I’m a little confused.”

“It’s okay.” She nodded. “One of the things they’ve been teaching us here is to accept responsibility for our actions. And I’m not going to deny that I’ve been a less than stellar mother to you and Brayden.”

Again, my mouth was doing that thing. Opening and closing, but no sound was coming out.

“But I do love you,” she continued. “And I want to be a part of your life, Brighton. You and Brayden are more important to me than the drugs or the booze, and it took Ryland to help me see that.”

“But... how?” I asked again.

“He opened up to me.” She shrugged. “Told me the cold, hard truth. And I felt like such an idiot for playing right into his hands. I felt weak. I was weak. But when he told me what happened to his family, and how much pain he was in, I never wanted you or Brayden to feel that way. He gave me a choice. He handed me a one-way ticket to this place, and a needle with enough drugs to take down a horse. He said it was my decision to make, but that he wasn’t going to watch me hurt you anymore.”

“Jesus, Norma,” I sputtered.

“He was right,” she said. “All I’ve been doing is hurting the people I love. For so many years because I couldn’t see past my own misery. Losing Frankie, and then thinking he was going to come take you two away from me whenever he saw fit, well it scared the living hell out of me. I guess I tried to disconnect from all of it in the best way I knew how.”

“So you really... you gave it all up,” I said.

“I’m trying my best, Brighton.” She stared down at her linked fingers with watery eyes. “But I’m not going to make any promises other than to say that I’m going to keep on trying. Ryland’s a good man for helping me this way, though he doesn’t want to admit it himself. He’s filled with so much pain though that I worry. I worry about you with him. But he’s come to see me a couple of times, and it seems like he’s trying too.”

“He has?” I asked. “He came to visit you?”

She nodded, wiping away the tears from her eyes. “He seems lonely. Misses you a lot.”

“Oh.” I glanced down at my shoes. “Well, I’m really glad you’re here, and that he’s helping you this way, but it doesn’t change anything between me and Ryland.”

“He told me that’s what you’d say.” She smiled. “But he wants to Brighton. He wants you to hear him out.”

“So that’s what this is all about?” I crossed my arms and started to close myself off again, thinking it had all been some sort of trick.

“No.” Norma shook her head. “I wasn’t supposed to say anything either way. But you know I’ve never been good at holding my tongue.”

I blinked up at her and held back a sob as she leaned forward and clasped my hand in hers. It was the closest she’d come to motherly affection in as long as I could remember.

“I’m the last person to give advice,” she said. “But if I can tell you one thing, Brighton, it’s that Ryland loves you with all of his heart. He

loves you so much that he put aside his feelings about me to do what he thought would make you happy. And I think that speaks for itself.”

I knew Norma didn’t know all the details of what had transpired, but I wasn’t going to bring them up either.

“But what about him and Brayden?” I asked. “They’re both being completely crazy. I can’t take it anymore.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “You’ll have to work that out with them. All I’m saying is I think that you should hear Ryland out. See what he has to say.”

“And he didn’t put you up to this?” I asked suspiciously.

“Nope.” She shook her head. “He said he wanted to do things his way. He’s a real control freak, that one.”

I laughed in spite of myself. “You have no idea.”

Chapter Eleven

Brighton

When I got back out to the car, Ryland was waiting for me inside. The divider was up, and I couldn't see Ted, which was probably for the best. He'd obviously tricked me.

I had no idea how Ryland had even gotten there, but he looked pissed. It didn't take me long to figure out why.

"Please tell me you aren't seriously living in that place Ted picked you up."

I ignored the harshness of his tone and gave him a weak smile.

"Ryland, what are you doing with Norma?"

I knew this was the last thing he wanted to talk about, but it needed to be said.

"I'm trying to help her." He sighed. "Isn't that obvious?"

"But why?" I asked. "The last time we spoke, you wanted her dead."

He actually winced at my words, and it surprised me.

"That was before," he stated. "Before the... before I almost killed you."

He couldn't look at me when he said it, and that same familiar urge to comfort him was there inside of me. I ignored it. Because he was right. He had almost killed me. And if I hadn't been there that night, I didn't know if he would have killed Brayden or not.

"I appreciate what you're doing, Ryland," I said. "I really do. But I'm sure you can understand how it's difficult to believe you can just go from wanting someone dead to helping her overnight."

"I don't have any ulterior motives," he assured me. "I only want what's best for you, Brighton."

"But what about your family?" I asked. "What about your revenge?"

He reached towards me, clasp my face in his palms. I didn't stop him this time. I needed to hear what he had to say.

"I didn't think there was anything I could ever want more than my revenge," he murmured. "But then I had you."

I bit my lip as frustration and pain warred inside of me. I wasn't too proud to admit I was weak. When it came to Ryland, I probably always would be. But I couldn't stand seeing him so lost. So broken. "You know this doesn't change anything between us," I whispered.

"Maybe not today," he said. "But..."

"Not ever, Ryland," I cut him off.

He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer, his breath skating across my lips. "I'm not letting you go, baby girl. You need to accept that."

I had to close my eyes and take a breath to gather my thoughts. It was the wrong choice because instead I caught a whiff of his cologne. The scent that I used to associate with comfort. I just wanted to lean into him. To feel his warmth and let him wrap his arms around me. To pretend like the past had never happened and none of the memories that hurt so much ever existed.

But I couldn't.

"I'm not taking you back," I insisted. "You need to accept that."

My words set something off inside of him, and before I even realized what was happening he pulled me into his lap and crushed my lips against his.

It had been so long since I'd felt them against me. Felt the fire inside of me that only Ryland could stoke. He was like gasoline, and the only thing left to do was combust. So I kissed him back. I gave into his frantic touches and savored them while I could.

His fingers drifted up my thighs, pushing the material of my dress up. And then his palm was rubbing me over my panties. Before my brain could catch up to what was happening, I rocked my hips against him.

It was wrong to lead him on. So, so, wrong.

But I missed this. I missed him. I wanted to allow myself to be weak, just for a few moments. That's what I told myself while I surrendered.

My lips found his throat and blazed a hot trail up to his jaw while he squeezed the flesh of my ass in his hands. He pushed my panties aside and unzipped himself. I had a moment of panic when I realized what was happening. If I couldn't resist him now, I didn't know how I ever would in the future. I tried to pull away.

Ryland gripped me by the arms and growled into my neck. "Don't deny me what's mine, Brighton."

I whimpered when he dragged his teeth along my throat, clamping down when he got to my shoulder. He knew I couldn't resist that. He knew how wet I was for him. It was always for him.

He gripped my inner thighs and nudged my legs apart, positioning himself at my entrance. He was watching me, his blue eyes searching mine so carefully. He needed to see that I wanted this too. And right then, I couldn't deny him.

I bit down on my lip and gave him a little nod. And then he was inside of me.

"Oh, fucking Christ..." he muttered. "Ah... God, I've missed this. You feel so good, baby girl. So fucking wet."

He gripped my hips with bruising fingers, rocking me back and forth along his arousal. He was harder than I'd ever felt him, his eyes heavy with lust and pleasure. He didn't have to tell me this was where he felt he belonged. I could see it written all over his face.

"Give into me," he pleaded, gripping my face in his hands. "Say you'll be mine again."

I buried my face in the space between his shoulder and his neck, wrapping my arms around him tightly. I couldn't give him what he wanted. Not this time.

"Brighton." His voice cracked as his touch grew rougher. Hard fingers dug into my hips, his teeth marking my body everywhere they skimmed. He was desperate to claim me. Tears clung to my lashes as he pressed me against his chest, his heart hammering against mine.

"Do you feel that?" he asked. "It doesn't beat without you. I need you."

I couldn't stand to hear his sweet words. I couldn't be pulled back into that vortex. So I pulled his face to mine and kissed him until we were both gasping for air. His fingers slipped between us, touching me in the place I so desperately needed. My head fell back and my eyes squeezed shut as every nerve inside of me flared to life.

"I'm the only one who can give you this," he murmured. "You know it's true, Brighton. I'll always be the only one..."

I exploded around him, crushing his shoulders with the grip of my fingers as I thrashed against him until I thought I might pass out. It had been so long. Too damn long. My contractions set him off soon after, and

his face twisted into a mixture of agony and bliss as he uttered a throaty groan against my neck.

One last deep thrust, and he was convulsing inside of me. "I love you," he clipped out. "So fucking much."

I let my body weight melt against his chest, and he stroked my back, maintaining the connection between us. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to keep the tears from falling. How could something so bad feel so right? How could I love this man so much? It was killing me, and I was only making it harder on both of us by allowing this to continue.

So with more strength than I felt, I pulled away and put myself together again. Ryland watched me carefully, and when I glanced out the window, I realized we were parked outside of my apartment already.

"Come home with me," he begged.

I couldn't look at him as my hand reached for the door handle. "I can't, Ryland."

"Brighton..." His voice filled with desperation. "I'll never be able to sleep knowing you're here. This is too much. I know you want to punish me, but..."

"I'm not punishing you," I whispered. "I'm really not, Ryland. I forgive you for the accident, okay. And I'm grateful for what you're doing for Norma. I... I honestly don't even know what to say about it. But right now, it doesn't change anything between us. You and Brayden..."

"I'm done with that," he insisted. "What do I have to do to convince you?"

I glanced back into his tormented eyes and shook my head. I honestly didn't know what he could do to convince me. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I would always be wondering. And if something happened to Brayden while I was with him, I would never forgive myself for it.

"There's nothing you can do," I answered. "I just need you to go home, Ryland. Go home and... live your life. The life you had before me."

"There was nothing before you," he protested. "And there's nothing without you. Don't you get that?"

He was getting frustrated. But that was good. It meant he believed this was what I wanted.

"Goodnight, Ryland." I opened the door and stepped outside.

I was on the sofa, stuffing my face full of Wasabi chips when Nicole walked in.

She set her bags down on the counter and gave me a weird look. “You do know there’s a body guard outside the door, right?”

My head fell back against the sofa with a groan. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Honestly...” Nicole muttered, “don’t hate me for saying this, but it kind of makes me feel a little better. There are some creepy guys hanging out in the hallway, and I hate walking past them.”

“I know,” I admitted. “You’re right. But if I accept this, then it’s just opening the door for him to keep doing stuff like this.”

“Yeah, I know.” She worried her lip between her teeth. “He’ll probably tell Matt about this now, and he’s going to freak. I bet you anything they team up on this.”

She looked hopeful, and I agreed with her. Of course Matt cared about her, but Nicole was still trying to push him away at every opportunity she got. I didn’t understand it. After their last spat, she hadn’t heard from him in over two weeks.

She was moping around, pretending it didn’t bother her. And no matter how much I urged her, she wouldn’t call him. I guess I really didn’t have room to talk though.

I had a lot of thinking to do where Ryland was concerned. But for now, I refused to rush into any decisions.

Chapter Twelve

Brighton

Security didn't even hesitate to let me into the building. I don't know why that surprised me, but it did. They told me Ryland had a standing invitation for me and to go on up. I stepped off the elevator and walked down his hallway. The place was deserted, which was for the best. I didn't need the other employees around for this.

It felt like a lifetime ago that I was here. The place seemed different in the dim evening lights. A sad, empty feeling filled the space that I'd spent so much time before. A glance at my desk, and I noticed there weren't any personal mementos from whoever had taken over my position. It didn't even look like it was being used.

Ryland's door was cracked, and I peeked inside to find him sitting at his desk. He wasn't working though. He was just leaning back with his head against the chair, staring at the ceiling. His eyes were shadowed by dark circles, and he looked exhausted.

I hated that. I hoped he was taking care of himself. I hoped that I wasn't the cause of those dark circles. I pushed the door open, and his eyes shot to mine. They flickered with surprise, and then he was up, walking towards me before he could stop himself.

"Brighton?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "But I wanted to come and talk to you in person."

"Okay."

He took my hand and pulled me over to the sofa. I didn't resist because it was good to feel his skin against mine. If only for a moment.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

He looked like he was choosing his words carefully. As though he were afraid anything he might say or do could scare me off. I hated that too. I didn't want him to feel like that. Things were so complicated between us, and I honestly didn't know where to begin.

I'd toyed with the idea of breaking the news to him today. But I still didn't know if I should. What if he didn't want anything to do with this? The thought was unbearable.

"Look, Ryland..." I paused. "I want to talk about that guy you have following me everywhere."

He closed his eyes and sank back against the couch. He didn't even have the energy to fight, which was so unlike him.

"Just humor me, baby girl," he pleaded. "What does it hurt? He's there to protect you."

He didn't get it, and he never would. I had my father to thank for that.

"I just don't like that he's reporting everything I do back to you," I said.

Ryland opened his eyes and stared at me, unmoving. "Why?" he asked. "Is there something you don't want me to know?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, fighting the urge to look down. I'd worn a baggy sweatshirt, so there was no way he could see.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean is there another man I need to know about?"

His expression was so tense that I couldn't help it. I reached out and smoothed my hand along his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into it.

"Brighton."

His voice was hoarse, and it sent my pulse skyrocketing. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. But I leaned forward and kissed him. Again.

I wanted to slap myself.

My lips had barely brushed over his when he tugged me onto his lap. My blood heated at the feeling of his hard body beneath me. God I missed this. I'd been having withdrawals since the last time I'd seen him, and now it was becoming harder and harder to refuse.

I just needed to feel him, just one more time. That's what I told myself as I reached down and tugged on his zipper. His hands were everywhere, inching up my skirt, stroking over my thighs. I was deliriously high from the effect he had on me.

"God, I miss you so much." He buried his nose against my hair and inhaled, rocking his erection against my palm. "It hurts, baby."

He was painfully swollen, and I needed him inside of me. I tugged my panties aside and pushed myself down onto him. He moaned and jerked beneath me, his fingers tightening their grips on my thighs. It was painful and possessive, and I missed that too.

But when he tried to tug my shirt off, I had to distract him. So I leaned in and brushed my lips over his throat, alternating between bites and kisses. True to his nature, he loved it.

“Do you feel how hard you make me?” he squeezed my ass in his hands. “You’re mine, Brighton. You’ll never stop being mine. No matter what.”

I didn’t know who he was trying to convince, but I couldn’t acknowledge that statement. He was right. I would always belong to him, heart and soul. He was the only man I ever wanted to give my body to. But what I wanted and what I needed were two different things.

Right now, for this moment, I just needed to put it all out of my mind. So I rocked down against him, enjoying the feeling of being connected to him in this way. My beautifully damaged Ryland. My light and my darkness.

Tears fell down my cheeks, and he kissed them away. He told me how much he needed me. How he’d do anything to make it up to me. And I cried harder. I cried for the loss of him. For the loss of this. I didn’t know how I was going to survive without it.

And when I combusted around him, I cried because it was all over. He followed soon after, but he didn’t pull out. He just wrapped his arms around me like a vice, crushing me against his chest. I knew he wanted to say something. He was biding his time, waiting for the right moment. He thought that would make a difference.

“Come home with me,” he whispered against me. “Come home to our bed and let me take care of you.”

Oh, God. I did not think this through. I pulled away from him, despite his resistance, and adjusted my clothes.

“I can’t, Ryland.”

“You can,” he insisted.

I had to tear my eyes away from him. I couldn’t bear to see the hope that lived there. I was an awful human being. I hated myself right then.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized weakly. “I have to go.”

“Brighton...” He tried to stand, but I bolted out the door before he could even get his pants zipped.

I made it to the elevator and pressed the close button repeatedly until the doors started to slide shut. Just before they did, I saw him round the corner, looking like he’d just lost me forever.

And I guess, in a way he had.

Chapter Thirteen

Ryland

Guess who'd come to pay yours truly a visit? No, not her. Not my little lotus flower.

I'm referring to my old friend darkness. No big surprise there, of course. But this time, it threatened to devour me. Coaxing me deeper into that empty abyss, welcoming with open arms. It'd be easy to fall into that trap again. But one image quashed any thoughts of self-pity I may have entertained.

Want to have a stab at what it could be?

Not necessary, I'd tell you anyway. It was Brighton, crumpled into a tiny pocket of metal. Blood coating her legs, a ghastly white face beneath the light of the moon while I clutched a revolver in my hand. A revolver I'd held to her brother's head only moments before, oblivious to the fact that my girl... my life... was suffering from my actions.

If ever there had been a moment suspended in time, it was that one. I hardly believed it was real. That my recklessness could have caused such a horrific and unexpected outcome. My body attempted in vain to reach her before my mind ever caught up. But I couldn't. It was history, repeated. Only this time, I'd orchestrated everything myself. The only light in my life was slipping away, and there was nobody else to blame. It wasn't Brayden. It wasn't Frankie, or Alfredo, or my father. It was me.

A gun is a cowardly way to kill someone. Also a merciful one. In my mind, it hadn't gone down like that at all. Brayden was meant to suffer as I had. But I'd gotten sloppy. Impatient. The longer the situation with Brighton continued, the more I doubted my intentions. It boiled down to revenge, or her. I just needed to get it over with, I decided. Let the chips fall where they may.

Funny thing about Karma. She's a bitch.

I knew I deserved Brighton's loathing. Her hatred. Her venomous words. I'd take all of it and more, so long as she was in my arms again. But

still. Fresh ideas were scarce, and old well and truly exhausted. For a man who thrived on planning out his every move with meticulous care, this was a dangerous thing.

But you already knew that, right?

Know what's worse than cold turkey? Just a little bump. One tiny sip to take the edge off. The edges never went away, they only got sharper. Every addict would tell you. Gray areas couldn't exist in a sober environment.

This game of cat and mouse was doing my fucking head in. There was a time when Brighton trusted me to know what was right for her. I'd taken for granted what a beautiful thing her trust was. Now it had withered up and died like everything else.

Left to my own devices, I'd sit and stare at the empty walls of my office all day and drink myself to death. Hypocritical, no? Few men handled this type of emotional baggage well, and I-even less. Word was spreading round the building like a serpent, employees whispering behind my back at every turn. Neither here nor there, really. Let them talk. But it was the sympathetic glances that unraveled me.

While we're delving into the past, I may as well tell you why I changed my name. My father ensured the media coverage was locked down and sealed up tight. His last ditch effort at protecting me, he'd finally done something properly.

Frankie's crew hadn't a clue I existed until I had the balls to walk up and face them myself. Probably, they inspired fear in most of the average joes to pay a little visit to their HQ, but I had nothing left to lose. So I made a deal. A deal with the devil himself.

Once they knew of me and we had an agreement in place, I settled on the next course of action. Changing my name didn't buy me safety. I did that on my own. But it bought me something else. An out from the irreverent pity and half-hearted condolences.

I didn't want pity. I wanted my fucking revenge.

That little nugget of hope kept me warm at night. Until Brighton. Now I didn't even have her. I'd given them both up, and what had it gotten me?

A whole lot of fucking misery that's what.

But if being miserable was the cost of weathering this storm, so be it. I'd made my bed of nails, and I was content to lie in it. Patience wasn't

one of my virtues, but for her I'd try. Five years of lying in wait had already done a number on my tolerance level. In a way, I blamed this for things imploding so badly. The anticipation really was too much for me. By the time I finally got hands on her, self-control was in short supply. More beast than man at that point, I'd allowed myself to indulge in every dark fantasy I ever had.

Five years was a long time to stew on all the sick and twisted shit you want to do. I reasoned that Brighton could fulfill whatever childlike dreams she entertained in her head by then. She could go to prom and date nice boys. Or bad ones, with her family history. I wasn't exactly certain which way the pendulum would swing. She blindsided me completely when I took her innocence.

It all snowballed from there. If you haven't already gathered this about me, I was completely hedonistic. Some might say selfish. Entitled. Whatever label you want to give it, I always got my way. And until Brighton understood this, I just needed to learn how to bide my time. Find a new direction. One that didn't involve killing Brayden. Because I would have her. She was already mine, and this stalemate couldn't go on forever. I'd see it through, till' she came back to me.

She had to. Right?

My fucking around and day drinking was interrupted by Matt poking his head into my office. Ah, perfect. Another shitty item on my agenda. Mind you, I was doing this for Nicole.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked.

I nodded and gestured to the chair. He sat down. "Heard from Nicole, lately?"

He shook his head and stared at the floor. Guess I wasn't the only sap in the room.

"That makes two of us then."

I walked over to the cabinet in my office and rummaged through my whiskey collection. Jack, Jim, Johnnie... the boys were all there. Something stronger was in order for what came next. It wasn't often in my life I admitted regret, but it'd been happening an awful fucking lot as of late.

Would Jackson see it as a betrayal? I imagined myself in his shoes. Wondered what I'd want for Brighton if I wasn't around. Nobody could ever love her the way I did. The thought alone made me want to crack some

skulls. But if I wasn't there, she'd need someone to take care of her. I was too blind to admit before that Nicole did too.

"I need to talk to you," I began. "About Jackson."

Matt's face grew wary, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to understand why. I hadn't mentioned Jackson's name since he died. The one time Matt tried to bring it up, I clocked him in the jaw. Needless to say it'd been a dead subject ever since.

"What about him?" Matt asked.

I sat back down at my desk and scrubbed the heels of my hands across my face. This was even harder than I thought.

"About what he would have wanted for Nicole."

Chapter Fourteen

Brighton

“How are you?” Norma asked.

I stared out at the garden, taking it all in since I hadn’t the last time I was here. The rehab center really was beautiful. I still couldn’t believe that Ryland had done this for her.

“I’m good,” I lied.

“Doesn’t look like it.” She sat back in her chair and bobbed her foot up and down. “You’re getting a little hefty.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. Okay, so I guess some things hadn’t changed. Norma could still be as blunt as ever.

“I’m not getting hefty, Norma. I’m pregnant.”

Her eyes widened, and she stared down at my belly in shock. “You are?”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “Four months now. But you can’t tell anyone, okay? Especially not Ryland.”

“Is it his?” she asked.

“Of course it is,” I scoffed.

She held her hands up and gave me a gentle smile. “I didn’t mean it that way, Brighton. I’m just surprised. I can’t believe you’re going to be a mama.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I’m scared.”

Her expression softened, and she reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“You’re going to do great,” she insisted. “So much better than I ever did.”

“Thank you,” I murmured. “I’m trying to do what’s right, but sometimes, I don’t even know what that is anymore.”

She nodded in understanding. If there was anyone who could relate to my predicament, it would be Norma. I never really cut her any slack for that, but I knew how much she both loved and feared Frankie. And he didn’t want her, so she dealt with it in the only way she knew how.

“I wish I could tell you what to do, Brighton,” she said. “But I hardly know myself. I guess that’s part of life, is figuring it out as you go.”

“Yeah I guess so,” I agreed.

We fell silent for a moment, and I fidgeted with my hands in my lap. There was something else I needed to ask, but I was half-afraid to.

“Have you heard anything from Brayden?”

She frowned, and right away, I knew I was justified for being worried.

“He’s called a couple times since you told him where I was. But he’s not real happy with me.”

“Of course he’s not,” I sneered. “Because the only thing he’ll see in the whole situation is that you’re taking Ryland’s side. He can’t see past anything else.”

“That sounds about right,” Norma agreed quietly.

She looked sad, and for the first time in a long time, I knew she needed my reassurance.

“You’re doing the right thing, Norma,” I said. “You’re taking care of yourself right now, and that’s all that matters. If Brayden can’t see that, then that’s his issue, not yours.”

“I know,” she agreed. “But I’m just... I’m worried about him, Brighton.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. I was too.

“How’s he paying the rent now that you’re gone?”

“He’s not.” She glanced down at her hands as she twisted them in her lap. “He said he’s living in Chicago.”

“Chicago?” The word came out as a whisper. “With who?”

She didn’t reply. But I didn’t need her to. Brayden wouldn’t have told her who he was there with, but it was obvious to both of us. And it scared the hell out of me.

“You don’t think he’s getting tied back up with...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence. How could he keep doing this to his family? For someone who said he cared, he didn’t seem to think about how any of his actions might affect us.

“I don’t know for sure,” Norma admitted. “But, he’s just like his father. Thinks he’s too good to get a real job. I’m afraid to even ask him what he’s doing.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I said, sounding more confident than I actually felt. “You just focus on getting healthy, Norma. Okay?”

I gave her a watery smile, and she returned it. “Okay Brighton. I love you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ryland

When I was a child, my mother used to take me down to the pier every weekend and spend an entire day devoting herself to doing whatever I fancied. Sometimes it was sailing, often times the aquarium, there were even the occasional bouts of watching sea lions frolic about.

Whatever the occasion, we had a tradition, her and I. She'd always take me to Dreyer's after and let me stuff my face with ice cream till' I wanted to puke. I must have sampled every flavor and topping combination my tiny brain could conjure up about a dozen times over. But not Katherine.

She preferred vanilla. Plain old, nothing added, boring as hell vanilla. I couldn't comprehend such a thing in my childlike noggin. There were so many other flavors. So many different possibilities. When I told her so, she'd laughed and stroked my cheek in a way that mothers do.

"Someday, sweet Jacob," she said. "Someday, you'll get it."

Sitting in my office-twenty years later-I finally got it. I leaned forward to brush the pads of my fingers over the framed photo of Brighton's pretty face. This dirty little habit of mine was starting to rival Norma's.

It all made perfect sense to me now, what my mother said. Vanilla was pure and unsullied. Cleansing to the palate, you had to savor it to appreciate it. I could sip at Brighton's vanilla sweetness for a thousand years and never be fully satisfied. I'd always replenish her, though. I swore it. I'd break her a thousand times if only so I could put her back together again.

Piles of work were strewn about my desk, forgotten and ignored. Everything was out of order and inviting chaos into my life. Care factor? Nil. The drive for what I did disappeared off a ridge along the Pacific Coast Highway on a night not too long ago.

Today was July 29th. My birthday. Did it surprise you that I was a lion? It shouldn't.

Birthdays had ceased to exist for me six years ago. I doubted Brighton had any special mark of this day on her calendar. But if she had, I

wondered what she'd have gifted me. She was thoughtful and attentive. It wouldn't be anything expected in circles such as mine. Seven fold ties or cufflinks made from the tusks of endangered species. No fine Cuban cigars or two-hundred-year-old bottles of scotch would spew forth from her hands.

Brighton would give something from the heart. Something that mattered.

I had an inkling of a few things that would've pleased me. Her waltzing into my office in white lingerie, getting down on her knees and sacrificing herself at my alter. Oh wait, she'd already done that. Still, there was nothing like a good old fashioned reenactment.

Would I have taken it all back if I could? That first day in the hotel room when I'd unknowingly altered my course so drastically. Probably not. I wasn't a saint, never would be. Those memories with Brighton were a lot like a penicillin shot. Painful, but necessary at times. They still made something in the vicinity of my chest stir every now and again.

From what you know of me, I'd gather you'd assume I was more than a little twisted. And you'd be right.

I wasn't always this way. Once upon a time I was a normal twenty-four-year-old who brought women flowers and took them to dinner. I never even considered being anything other than respectful towards them.

That was how my mother raised me after all. To woo and charm and play by the rules.

Then life happened. And brick by brick, my sensibly constructed mortar kingdom disintegrated before my eyes. My reality check was that life didn't play fair. Life took. And people took. And every day that I woke up empty fucking took... *something*. I was forged in the fire of blood and misery. The sadist inside of me created someone in his image. Or perhaps he only brought to life the monster always lurking there. I'd never really know for certain.

But Brighton loved the monster. She'd admitted as much. So what good would it do to pretend I was anything else? Why show up with wine and chocolate when you know your girl wants leather and filthy words?

And yet there I sat. Thirty years old in my sad office with my sad paperwork. Alone.

I wanted her to text me. To say something. I'd been waiting all day. It was a foolish notion. She didn't even know it was my birthday. I knew

when hers was. I'd buy her the world, but somehow I doubted it'd make a lick of difference.

For the last six years, I'd been alone on this day. It was never an issue. Indeed, I preferred it that way. But tonight, I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be with her.

And I was sick of waiting.

Chapter Sixteen

Brighton

Something warm skimmed over my neck, and I shivered as I nuzzled closer. I knew that scent anywhere. Whiskey and Ryland.

I smiled, because I was dreaming, and in my dreams, I could still have him.

“Baby girl,” he murmured. “Just let me hold you.”

I felt his warmth against my back, and I sighed against him. His heartbeat was as strong as I remembered, soothing me in a way that only he could. It felt so real. His hands were on my body. Stroking my hip, my ribs, my arms. I was falling deeper, and I knew I was going to lose him at any moment.

“Ryland,” I whispered.

“Yes, baby,” he replied. “I’m right here.”

His hands drifted over my belly, and I felt him pause. This was my dream, so it could be anything I wanted. I imagined him telling me how happy he was. That we never had to be apart again, and he would take care of us. I would let him this time. Because it was just a dream.

I woke to sunlight streaming through the cracked blinds, and I whined. I really needed to get those fixed. Stretching out my sore muscles, a smile crept across my face. My dream had been so real last night, so very...

The scent of amber and cinnamon floated up from my pillow, and my breath hitched. I wasn’t imagining that. *That* was real.

I shot up, clutching the blankets around my chest. Ryland was sitting on the end of the bed. But he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at the picture of the sonogram they’d taken in the hospital. The one that I kept in my dresser drawer.

Oh, God.

My heart squeezed in my chest. He knew.

I waited for what felt like forever. He knew I was awake, but he wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't say anything. And I didn't know why.

He was disappointed. Horrified. That could be the only explanation.

Finally, he stood up, his blue eyes meeting mine. I was afraid to look too deeply for fear of what I'd see there.

"How did you get in here?" I whispered.

"Anyone with two brain cells to rub together could get in here," he roared. "And you're fucking pregnant! How could you not tell me this?"

That was anger in his voice. Definite anger. And anger equated to disappointment. Right? My eyes burned, but I wouldn't let him see me cry.

"It's none of your business," I bit out.

"None of my business?" he growled. "I'd have to disagree, Brighton. I'd say this is very much my fucking business."

"I knew you'd react this way!" I yelled. "That's why I didn't tell you."

He laughed darkly, and the cold Ryland was back, just like that. No more apologies, no more sweetness.

"No, you didn't tell me because you wanted to punish me. You wanted to take this away from me. Well, I've got news for you, Brighton. That's not going to fucking happen."

"What are you saying?" My lip wobbled.

"Get your things together." He walked towards the door. "You're moving out of this shit hole. Today."

Chapter Seventeen

Ryland

Have you ever had one of those moments where you felt as though time itself had suspended? Where you had to drag your sorry ass out of bed every morning with a mental pep talk you knew was complete drivel? Even the simplest gestures robbed you of precious energy. Dignity notwithstanding, I took comfort in the robotic voice inside my head instructing me what to do. How to perform the most basic of human functions.

Time to brush your teeth. Comb your hair. Should probably feed yourself something between shots. Gym? Meh...

How about jacking off in the shower instead? Nada. Not even energy for that. Ladies, we had a crisis on our hands.

The last thirty something days of my life had been a perpetual merry-go-round of this bullshit. People moved and spoke around me. Even to me, probably. Couldn't say for certain. The silence in my ears was deafening. The colors in my world had evaporated into a haze of gray. Nothing made a lick of sense anymore.

My company. My life. My purpose.

For me, success wasn't measured by the sum in my bank accounts. It was a welcome side effect, sure. But I had the drive and ambition to succeed in any chosen field. It wasn't cocky, just fact. When you want gravely enough, you make it happen.

I had wanted more than anyone.

Now that my ruthless plotting had bled away, only scabs remained. I'd never given it much thought, what success meant to me. Many people believed my father to be successful. I still recall how cruelly I'd laughed at the mockery of the word after tragedy befell him. A tragedy of his own making, nonetheless.

If you'd asked me six months ago, I would have stood by that arrogant proclamation. I was too attached to the notion to let it go. My father had not been successful in his business. That was sorely obvious. But

as I watched the clouds swirl and disintegrate outside of my high-rise window, unsettling clarity descended upon me.

He had everything he ever wanted. Two ostentatiously beautiful houses, boats, cars, family holidays in Europe. Plenty of materialistic things. But it was family. The thought was so simplistic, and yet it struck me down with the weight of its importance. My father had everything that couldn't be measured with gold. The most exceptional wife and mother a man could hope for. The perfect children he'd always boasted of. When I pictured his face-before his financial troubles-I remembered how blissfully fucking happy he was. A fool's paradise, as they say.

Only now did I grasp that the successes I'd thought mattered amounted to jack shit.

I swiveled around in my chair and edged closer to the window, pressing my palm against the glass. The sky was overcast and foggy, pouring down big fat tears of misery on the city of San Francisco. I fixated my attention on the tiny people milling about on the streets below, wondering if any of them could relate to how I felt in this moment.

Probably not.

The Jane and John Doe's down there lived in another existence. By all outward appearances, they seemed content, but were they really? Husbands worked their fingers to the bone and whisked their mistresses off to hotels for afternoon trysts. Trophy wives racked up credit card bills in the hunt for the next best item that would fill their vacuous lives. Children splashed in puddles with their Wellies while their nannies scolded them and smiled. I couldn't actually see these things of course, but it was how I imagined it in my head. Let me run with it, will you?

This was not the way I was raised. My parents were legitimately and freakishly happy. But there were times when I'd caught a glimpse of my father's worried face as he hunched over his desk with a glass of bourbon late at night. There were signs. We'd all just chosen not to see them. He'd taken the weight of the world on his shoulders, as that's what fathers do, right? And we were all happy to let it continue on without a hiccup.

Perhaps if I'd done something, said something. Things could have been different. It was a quandary I'd faced many times in my head. I'd picked it apart and dissected the remnants so many times nothing but bone dust remained.

It was easier to hate my father for what he'd done than to acknowledge I'd failed him. To admit I should've stepped up to the plate and showed him what I was capable of back then. It's funny how these little blips in life can change everything. How now, six years later, I questioned everything I thought I knew about my parents. The utterly terrifying news of being a father would do that to a man.

My child was inside her.

A tangible and very real slap in the face.

Why, you may ask? Did you take me for one of those men who wouldn't own up to his responsibilities? Because I may have been many things, but I wasn't a goddamn scoundrel. If you must tar me with any particular brush, don't let it be that one.

Brighton did.

She'd given me no choice in the matter. Deemed me unfit the moment she found out, from the gist of it. Slapped me with the sperm donor label and sentenced me to a cardboard box, only to rot in a storage unit somewhere for the next eighteen years.

I couldn't see past my anger this time. Rational thought was of little consequence when it hissed and popped inside of me, sizzling about like grease inside a frying pan. It was only a matter of time before I caught fire.

Like a bad movie reel, the words played on in my mind. *She hid this from me.* She could've plunged a stake through my heart and it would've hurt less. As it were, it felt like she'd unloaded an entire clip of hollow points inside my gut.

I'd be the first to confess I had questionable morals. My track record wasn't the best, probably. I wasn't proud of all the things I'd done. I hated what I'd done to her. Knowing now she was pregnant when it happened? It gutted me. GUTTED ME.

These words weren't for show. I hadn't been this fucked up since fate punched a ticket to a front row seat at my family's death. I didn't get the feels often. Maintaining a balance of carefully numb and indifferent was a coping mechanism. My cavalier fucking attitude worked for me. Shutting the door on grief, I let it fester deep inside of me like a cancer.

That cancer almost destroyed Brighton instead of me. Now I'd learned it was also my unborn child too. How do you think I felt?

Like a giant fucking worthless prick that's how.

But she should've known how I'd feel about this. How much it'd mean to me, or how much I'd want to be a part of it. She snatched it away from me without so much as a second thought.

Did she think I'd be a shitty father too?

The better question was, could I even blame her if she did? I didn't know the answer to that. But what I did know was I had a right to prove myself if she'd given me the chance. But she didn't.

And that said everything I needed to know.

Chapter Eighteen

Brighton

Ryland had really gone to the mattresses on this one.

Not only had he brought Matt, who was now in the corner arguing with Nicole about our ‘shitty apartment’, but he’d called my landlord too.

“Sorry.” The guy shrugged. “But there’s been a violation of the lease.”

Ryland was standing in the doorway, his arms crossed, watching the entire interaction. This had him stamped all over it, and I knew my landlord was full of shit. Money talks, and he didn’t blink twice when Ryland paid him off.

“What kind of violation?” I argued. “I want to see proof.”

“You can take that up with my lawyers.”

“Lawyers?” I frowned. This guy couldn’t be serious. He couldn’t afford a fresh coat of paint, let alone lawyers.

“That’s what I said.” He slapped the papers down onto the counter and headed towards the door. “You have three days to vacate the premises.”

“That’s illegal!” I shouted.

I was pretty sure, anyway. But the landlord didn’t seem to care. He just stomped out, humming a happy little tune as he went. I expected to see a victorious smile on Ryland’s face, but there was no such thing. His eyes were still ice cold, his expression flat.

“I’ve been more than patient, Brighton,” he said. “I let you have the upper hand because I was sorry for what happened.”

I shot him a scathing look, but it didn’t even faze him. “And I’m still sorry about that. But the games stop, right here, right now. You’re having my baby, and I’m done playing. You and Nicole will move back into your apartment. Today. I will not have the mother of my child living in a place like this, and that is not up for debate. Do you understand?”

“You’ve given me no choice.” I glared.

He didn’t even look remotely sorry about it as he continued. “Ted will be at your service, should you need to go anywhere. And I will provide

everything you need, financially.”

“And what else?” I snapped. “Is there some sort of agreement you’d like me to sign in blood while you’re at it? My life and body belong to you for the next eighteen years?”

“No,” he responded flatly. “No contracts, no agreements, no us. You’ve made it abundantly clear that isn’t what you want. So this is just about the baby now.”

“Oh.” I swallowed, and it felt like there was glass in my throat.

He didn’t want to be with me anymore. Why the hell did that hurt so much? It was what I wanted, but hearing him say it cut me to the bone.

“And what happens when the baby is born?” I rasped. “You aren’t taking it away from me.”

“You mean like you took it away from me?” he shot back.

God, he was really upset about this. I honestly didn’t understand why. The first time I’d asked him if he was trying to get me pregnant, he’d sounded so horrified by the idea. And he was the one who insisted on getting birth control right away. It was only logical to believe he’d still feel the same. But I guess I was wrong. And I worried that he wouldn’t ever forgive me for it.

“You know I would never do that to you, Brighton,” Ryland said, his tone softening a fraction. “But I will have equal rights.”

“Of course,” I whispered.

“And when the baby is born, I’d like you to consider staying home. I think it would be best. And, of course, I’d take care of everything for you.”

“Right.” I nodded, my eyes burning with unshed tears. He sounded so detached. Like this was some kind of business arrangement he was making as if I had suddenly ceased to exist. It fucking hurt.

“Ted’s waiting downstairs to drive you to the apartment,” he informed me.

“I haven’t even packed yet,” I said.

“Let the movers do it,” he insisted. “I don’t want you lifting anything heavy.”

I would have protested, but I didn’t have the energy to fight anymore. I barely had the energy to muster up a fake smile for him. “Okay, Ryland.”

Chapter Nineteen

Ryland

The days bled together in a repetitive stream of work.

How this hadn't bothered me before, I haven't a clue. Now it all seemed tedious. Day in, day out, the dull fucking thud of my fingers on a keyboard. Tapping out texts and emails and squaring away things of a monotonous nature.

Hello hamster, meet treadmill.

Lately I'd taken up reading to fill the mindless drat. Baby books, if you could believe that. In one of my drunken stupors I'd apparently purchased a whole shit load of them on Amazon, with express delivery. I wanted to learn everything there was on the subject if only to prove to myself I could do this.

A knock at my door sounded, and I glanced up to catch Matt lingering there. Since our talk the week before, he'd been visiting me often. Frankly, I didn't know what to make of it. I hadn't a need for a friend since I was in college, but it appeared that was his end goal with these little visits.

He was a good friend to Jackson. The two of them were thick as thieves from the time they began building Lego kingdoms in middle school. Truth be told, I liked Matt. Begrudgingly, perhaps. I wasn't in the habit of liking anyone for longer than what they could do for me.

Brash?

A little, maybe, but necessarily so. A man in my position was more accustomed to making enemies. You see, all the players in my world had their own selfish agendas. Quick to ask for a favor and even quicker to disappear when you needed it to be reciprocal. The moment the flash of the cameras went off, they were out the door and onto the next big fish.

The friends I did have made themselves scarce after my family died. They didn't know how to handle it either. I hadn't seen the need to replenish such trivial relationships. Now I bartered in tit for tat. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. The situation with Matt was a little out of my

emotional league if I was being honest. I was trying to do something out of the good of my heart. Heh.

I'd seen the error of my ways. Nicole's fragility could no longer be denied, and I took responsibility for that. I'd played a role in keeping her in such a dark emotionless pit. What could I say, hell was a lonely place, and I didn't want to be alone.

But now, I was trying to make good. Absolution and all of that. Was there any amount of holy water that could make me clean again?

"Hey man." Matt took a seat without invitation. "How's it going?"

I tossed the baby book aside and opted for the bottle of whiskey on my desk instead.

"Who knew the many things that could go wrong during childbirth?"

"Brighton's tough as nails," Matt replied. "She's going to be just fine, Ryland."

Easy for him to say. That wasn't how I saw her. All I saw were potential disasters at every turn. Things that would take her away from me. Not that she was mine anymore.

I took a shot and wiggled the bottle in Matt's direction in offering. He nodded, and I poured us both a tumbler before leaning back in my chair.

"What do you want?"

Blunt and to the point, my words were far past the point of shocking Matt anymore. He'd seen my descent. He knew this was all that remained. He expected nothing more. In a way, it made me feel at ease around him.

"I need some advice about Nicole," he mumbled.

"And you're asking me?" I arched a brow at him. "Have you seen the train wreck I've made of my life recently?"

"Okay." Matt shrugged. "So maybe it's not really advice I'm after. More like a favor."

One of my least favorite words. I had the distinct impression I wasn't going to like it in this case either. "What kind of a favor?"

"You need to tell her yourself, Ryland. She's never going to buy it if you don't."

"And how do you propose I do that when she isn't speaking to me?"

"Since when have you ever shied away from persistence?" Matt cajoled.

I shrugged. He did have a point there. Also, I'd been planning to chat with Nicole anyway. But I didn't want Matt to think I was doing it for him.

"I'll see what I can do."

He grinned, and I pointed at the door.

"Now get out of my office."

Chapter Twenty

Brighton

“It’s so strange being back here.” Nicole furrowed her brow as she looked around the apartment.

“I know,” I agreed.

“Maybe we could redecorate,” she said thoughtfully. “Get ready for the baby.”

“Sure.” I slumped further into the couch.

I didn’t know how we were going to do that since Ryland had moved all of my stuff down here. He’d set up my sewing room in the spare bedroom, erasing all parts of me from his own apartment. I couldn’t even go in there. I didn’t know how I was supposed to set up a nursery.

“Brighton?” Nicole placed her hand on my arm. “Are you okay? I hate seeing you like this.”

“I’m fine.” I smiled weakly.

“You’re not fine,” she protested. “Please don’t be sad. What can I do to cheer you up?”

“You could call Matt and make up with him,” I teased.

Her face soured, and she shook her head.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Will you look at us?” she snorted. “A couple of sad sacks moping around because of the bastard men in our lives. We need to get a grip.”

“Fair point.” I laughed.

“We should do something fun today. Let’s go shopping for the baby. This is supposed to be a happy time for you.”

“I don’t have any money,” I argued.

“That isn’t true,” she smirked. “You have Ryland’s card. And I do remember him telling you to use it. C’mon, you could shop for years and still not even put a dent in his bank balance. This is for the baby. We need to get prepared. Do you even know how much stuff babies need?”

I shrugged, because I knew she was right. I still hadn't bought anything yet. And it did sound kind of fun.

"Alright," I relented. "But let's not go too crazy."

Nicole was right. Babies needed a lot of stuff.

It was hard to tell what was actually necessary, and what wasn't. But Nicole had no problem throwing whatever she thought might be slightly useful into our shopping cart.

"Have you thought of a theme yet?" she asked, staring at some different wallpaper trims in bright colors.

"No." I shook my head. "I wanted to wait and see what I'm having first."

She pouted. "That isn't until next week, maybe. If they can tell."

Next week. God, that was surreal. I couldn't believe how fast it had gone. I wondered if Ryland would want to know. We hadn't even discussed it. We hadn't discussed much of anything since I'd moved back two weeks ago.

Every day, he sent me exactly one text to check in with me and see how I was doing. He told me if I needed anything at all, I was to contact him right away. But I hadn't thought of anything that sounded like a good enough reason to bother him.

It hurt, because as much as I loved Nicole, I wanted Ryland to be the one to do these things with me. It was silly and unrealistic, but suddenly my shopping trip didn't seem all that fun anymore.

"Maybe we could just do something yellow," Nicole continued.

"I'm really tired," I blurted. "I think I'm all shopped out for one day."

"Really?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Okay, I'm sorry Brighton. You're right, we still have plenty of time. Let's go home and you can take a nap."

I spent the entire weekend sewing while Nicole moped around the apartment and scrubbed every surface she could find. She was full of anxious energy again, and I didn't know what had been going on with her.

I thought maybe she was nervous about looking for a new job, but it could also be because her and Matt still weren't speaking. It was a subject I wanted to revisit, and tonight, I had every intention of doing just that.

I'd gone to her favorite bakery and bought her a dozen cupcakes, fully intending to do nothing but binge on sugar and make her pour her heart out. But when she breezed into the apartment looking relaxed and happy, I was a little surprised. She set to work, laying out a truck load of takeout food on the counter.

"I ordered just about everything on the menu," she stated. "So help yourself to whatever you want."

She wasn't making eye contact with me, and I knew something was up.

"Nicole?"

"Yeah?" she asked absently, bending down to look through the cupboard as though she had lost something.

I walked around the counter and shut the cupboard, forcing her to look up at me as I crossed my arms.

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" she blinked.

Now that I was closer, I could see that her eyes were swollen and puffy, but she had a smile on her face that was the polar opposite.

"Nicole... I can see you've been crying," I said carefully. "Tell me what's going on."

"Sheesh, I can't get anything past you," she muttered as she stood up and leaned against the counter.

"Blame it on the men in my life," I retorted.

"I planned to tell you all of this after dinner," she said. "But I met Ryland for coffee today."

"You did?"

That familiar space in my chest hollowed a little more at the thought of him. I'd been doing so good at keeping him off my mind, but the simple mention of his name was enough to almost topple my resolve again.

"He's been messaging me for a while about it," she said. "And I decided to go see what he wanted. Despite everything that's happened, he's

still like a brother to me..."

"You don't have to justify why you went," I assured her. "I know you care about him, Nicole. I want you two to be friends, nothing would make me happier."

"Well honestly, I was pretty much expecting the entire conversation to be about you," she said. "I thought he was going to try to get me to talk to you or something. But it wasn't about that at all."

"What was it about?" I asked curiously.

"It was about Jackson." She leaned against the counter and stared off into the distance for a moment. "Ryland told me that it was time for me to live my life. To be happy."

Warmth filled my heart when I realized what she was saying. Ryland had finally absolved her of her guilt over moving on.

"That's really amazing, Nicole." I smiled for her. "You deserve it."

"That isn't all." She rifled through her purse and pulled out a check. "He gave me this too."

I stared at the check addressed to Nicole with more zeros than I could count, trying to understand what it meant.

"He sold the house on Belvedere Island," she explained. "And he said that Jackson would have wanted me to have the money."

"He sold it?" I repeated, tears brimming my eyes. "But... that was where he grew up. It was the only thing he had left..."

"That's what I said." Nicole shrugged. "But Ryland said it wasn't home anymore. That without his family, it doesn't feel right, and it never will."

Shock resonated through my entire body at his decision. I could only imagine how difficult that must have been for him, and I wondered how he was handling it.

"Did he..." I cleared my throat and tried to wash away my emotion. "Did he look okay?"

"He looked... different," she answered.

"Different, how?"

"I don't know, he seemed kind of... defeated."

"Oh."

"He asked me to give you something too." She pulled another envelope from her purse.

I took it between my shaky hands and tore off the seal, hoping it was a letter. Some kind of communication from him other than a text. I hoped he was getting better and that his anger really was gone. But did that mean he was moving on from me too?

I was disappointed when I shook out the contents and found another check. It was for twenty million dollars, and it was addressed to Sophia's Shoes. My legs wobbled a bit, and I had to grip the counter to keep from falling over as I read through the paperwork.

It was a donation to the charity which stipulated that 50% of the monies would be deposited into my own personal account in order for me to run the foundation full time.

Nicole peeked over my shoulder and gasped as she saw the amount.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "That's..."

"Crazy?" I finished for her, setting the check down on the counter. "I can't accept that."

"Why not?" she asked. "It's for the foundation. He obviously wants you to run it. And he probably wants you to feel like you have a steady income, Brighton. You're having a baby."

"Do you think that's why?" I blinked up at her. "He's paying me off?"

"What?" Her eyes widened. "Of course not. Where would you get that idea?"

I didn't get to answer because there was a knock at the door. Nicole almost looked embarrassed as she moved to open it.

"I hope you don't mind, but I invited Matt."

I smiled at the blush on her cheeks. "Of course not."

"Hey, Brighton." He gave me a hug as he sauntered inside. "Nice to see you again. I can see the baby's getting bigger."

"It is." I smiled and patted my bump.

"Well, I don't know about you ladies, but I'm starving."

"C'mon, grab a plate," Nicole urged. "You're eating for two now."

We were sitting on the sofa watching TV, and I couldn't help but notice that Matt and Nicole were getting closer and closer as the evening went on.

He'd wrapped his arm around her twenty minutes ago, and now they were even holding hands. It was the most adorable thing I'd ever seen, but at the same time, it was making the emptiness in my chest ache.

I was about to excuse myself to bed when the doorbell rang again, and I shot Nicole a questioning glance. "Are you expecting anyone else tonight?"

"No." She frowned.

I padded towards the door and looked through the keyhole, glimpsing a woman dressed in a nurse's uniform.

I opened the door a crack and returned her cheerful smile. "Can I help you?"

"Are you Miss Valentine?" she asked.

"Uh... yeah?"

"My name is Emma Charles. I'm here to be your nurse." She said it in a way that I'm sure sounded perfectly reasonable, but I just stared at her in confusion.

"Excuse me?"

"Do you mind if I come in?" she gestured towards the apartment.

"Mr. Bennett sent me."

"Okay, sure. Sorry."

She came in with a medical bag and took a seat as she started to explain. Matt and Nicole joined me in the kitchen and listened in.

"Mr. Bennett has hired me to be your round the clock nurse and baby consultant. I'm here to help you with whatever you need, whether it's assisting with meal preparation, cleaning, or any medical emergencies that should arise."

"You've got to be kidding me," I protested.

"I'm really not." She frowned. "I'm highly qualified for this job, Miss Valentine. If you'd like me to provide credentials..."

"I'm sure that you are," I said apologetically. "But the thing is, I don't need a nurse or a consultant."

"But I've already been paid," she argued. "A lot of money. Mr. Bennett wants to ensure you and his baby have the very best care. I'm here to help you."

She said it as though I didn't understand what her role was, but it was perfectly clear. Ryland had hired someone to wait on me hand and foot. Again, another gesture that I'm sure seemed perfectly logical to him.

I decided to try for another tactic, one that wouldn't hurt her feelings.

"Look, I really appreciate your offer of services. But as you can see, the apartment is already quite full, and there's really not room..."

"I can sleep anywhere," she volunteered. "A sofa will do. And once Mr. Bennett has finished up the arrangements for the new apartment, I'll have my own room..."

New apartment? I glanced at Nicole and she shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe it's not such a bad idea," she said. "You could use a little help, Brighton. You've been really busy with the charity stuff lately, and you look tired all the time."

"Really, Nicole?" I squeaked.

Matt chuckled and pulled her against his side. "If you aren't happy with the arrangement, Brighton, maybe you should take it up with Ryland?"

"Oh he'd like that, wouldn't he?" I grumbled.

The poor nurse looked like she had no idea what she'd gotten herself into.

"Why don't you relax and dish yourself up a plate of food," I told her. "I'm going to speak to Mr. Bennett myself."

Chapter Twenty-One

Brighton

I fully expected to hold onto my anger and give Ryland a piece of my mind when I stormed into his apartment. But as I walked through each room, I came up empty.

I padded back through the living room, wondering if he could still possibly be at work. It was late though, and I doubted I'd be able to get into the building. Then another thought occurred to me. One that had been bouncing around in my head for a while.

I wondered if he'd found someone else since he'd given up on me. If he was out with her at that very moment. My heart stuttered and my stomach churned.

No, he wouldn't do that. Ryland always told me he'd waited five years for me. There was no way he could just move on so quickly. But as fast as he'd gone cold, I really didn't know where his feelings were at. Just when I thought about giving up and walking out the door, something out on the balcony caught my eye.

I turned around and examined his profile in the moonlight as he stared out at the skyline. All of my irritation deflated when I saw him sitting there in the cold, looking more lost and alone than I'd ever seen him. I drew closer to him, unable to keep my head and heart from wanting the same thing. I pushed open the glass door, but he didn't hear me. His skin looked ice cold, and his eyes were empty.

"Ryland?"

He turned at the sound of my voice, and something flared to life in his eyes as his gaze travelled over my face. He took a step closer on instinct, but then stopped short.

"Brighton? Are you okay?"

His eyes travelled down to my belly as I nodded, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets in an effort to control himself. I could tell he wanted to touch me, and honestly, I wanted him to touch me too. We were so close, but so far away.

“The nurse...” I stammered.

“Please.” He took another step. “Just give me this one concession. That’s all I’m asking.”

I shook my head. “It isn’t what I want.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and blew out a breath. He was heartbroken, but he didn’t understand. I wanted to tell him, but I couldn’t find the words. My pride and my heart were at war, and things with Ryland were never like this before. He usually took whatever it was he wanted, without question. And that included me.

But now there were so many different emotions between us. Emotions I didn’t even know how to deal with. This man before me was not the same man who’d blackmailed me ten months ago. He was not the same man who’d tried to kill my brother, or who had funded Norma’s addictions. This man was a broken, empty shell... and it was breaking me to see him this way. But he still wouldn’t let go of his anger over me hiding this from him. He seemed to be in the habit of taking his pain and twisting it into anger. And I didn’t know how to get through to him.

“Nicole said you’ve been tired,” he remarked. “I’m just trying to help, Brighton. In the only way that I can.”

It wasn’t the only way he could help, but again I was too proud to admit that.

“The nurse said something about a new apartment?” I asked. “What was she talking about?”

“That apartment isn’t going to work,” he said. “I think we both know that. I have a couple other places I’m looking into. I was going to text you and ask if you’d come look at them with me tomorrow.”

The way he said it was so business-like again, I hated it. But I nodded anyway.

“Please just give Emma a chance,” he continued. “Let her take some of your stress away, Brighton. It isn’t good for the baby.”

I frowned, because I knew he was right. And when he put it that way, it sounded selfish of me not to take him up on it. Most women would probably kill to have what he was offering while they were pregnant.

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll give her a chance.”

“Thank you.”

Silence fell between us, and it was awkward. Things had never been this way before. I didn’t know what to say or how to act anymore. So I

turned to go.

“I’ve been doing some reading,” Ryland said. “I think you’re supposed to start feeling some movement soon.”

I nodded, because I’d read the same thing in my baby book.

“Have you?” he asked. He looked worried, like he was missing out on something.

“Not yet.” I smiled. “But I’ll tell you when I do, I promise.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “And I made you an appointment for next week to have an ultrasound, so we can go together. I think you’re due for one.”

I bit my lip and nodded. No way was I going to tell him that I already had an appointment in my old neighborhood. Besides, I wanted him to be there with me.

“Thank you.”

He cleared his throat and tore his eyes away. “Anyway, it’s late. So I guess you should probably get some rest.”

“Yeah.”

I walked towards the door solemnly.

“I’ll have Ted pick you up at noon tomorrow.”

“Okay, Ryland.”

“Goodnight, Brighton.”

“Goodnight.”

“So?” Ryland arched a brow at me expectantly as my eyes wandered over the apartment once more.

It was a luxury loft that took up the entire top floor of an apartment building. Complete with a bay view and all the comforts that anyone could ever want. And the real kicker? It had been divided into two living spaces. There was very little in the way of privacy, with only a sliding partition that extended between the lounge areas. Ryland had calmly explained that he would have one side, and I’d have the other.

“You want to raise our baby here?” I clarified. “In this sterile apartment?”

He looked miffed, but I didn’t care. Technically there was nothing wrong with the apartment, but the realization that he was committing to us being separated for the next eighteen years upset me. I knew it was

ridiculous. This was what I told him I wanted. And now I was completely contradicting that. I wanted to blame it on the hormones, but I couldn't even do that.

"What's wrong with this one, Brighton?"

There was an edge of frustration to his voice, but I didn't care. I didn't want to be here another moment.

"You can't possibly think this would work," I fumed. "What's going to happen when you start dating again Ryland? You're just going to bring your girlfriend back to the apartment while I'm sitting in the next room with your baby."

He tore his eyes away from me and stared out the window. "It would never be like that."

"You say that now," I continued. "But you can't possibly know that. You're not going to be single forever."

I didn't know why I was pushing this. I was making myself crazy, but I wanted to hear his response. To see if the final nail had already been wedged into our coffin. If we were really over.

Ryland didn't answer, and that was answer enough.

"What do you want from me?" he asked. "I'm trying to do the right thing here."

"I don't want anything," I said weakly. "I just want to go home. I'm tired."

It was a lie, but I knew Ryland wouldn't argue me on this point. Unfair? Yes. But I needed to get out of this apartment and everything it represented.

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll keep looking. Ted will take you home."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brighton

Ryland and I sat in uncomfortable silence in the doctor's waiting room. The place looked expensive, and I had no doubt he'd probably paid a fortune for me to come here. The other mothers-to-be were dressed in designer clothes and heels and were no doubt highly prominent figures of society.

On the drive over, Ryland informed me that Dr. Maria was the best of the best. Reportedly, an OB/GYN to the stars-and now, little old me too.

He'd really been going out of his way to help me in whatever way he could, and I did appreciate that, regardless of how strained things were between us. He'd been reading a lot, and over the last week he'd started to send me text messages of little things that surprised him or freaked him out. Like little facts he'd picked up in the books or information on food cravings. It was kind of adorable that he was so interested, and it was a bittersweet feeling for me. He was going to make a great father.

"Brighton Valentine?" the nurse popped her head through the door.

"That's me." I stood up and Ryland followed me down the hall.

She paused to weigh me, and my face flamed in embarrassment as Ryland stood there expectantly.

"Turn around," I ordered.

"Why?" he frowned. "I need to know these things."

"No you don't," I snapped. "This isn't your concern."

"I want to make sure you're eating enough, Brighton."

The nurse gave us an amused grin as she pushed the scales back and forth. "I'll write it down and let you two decide while you wait."

She ushered us into an empty room and asked the usual questions. When I told her I was still having occasional bouts of morning sickness, Ryland looked worried. I could already see him making a mental note to google it later, and I hoped the nurse would put him at ease.

“While that isn’t great news, that does sometimes happen,” she assured me. “But let us know if it gets any worse, or to the point that it feels unbearable. Have you been under a lot of stress lately?”

I shifted in my chair, and I could practically feel the tension rolling off of Ryland. “Not really,” I lied.

“That can sometimes cause it too,” she said. “You may be a little more sensitive when pregnant, so stress can induce it.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Alright, Brighton.” She smiled as she stood. “I’m going to have you hop up on the table and lift your shirt up.”

I climbed up on the table, feeling Ryland’s eyes on me as I tugged my shirt up just beneath my breasts. This was the first time he’d seen me like this, and I was a little nervous. I glanced over to find him staring at my belly, and I wanted so badly to know what he was thinking.

“I’m just going to get the technician,” the nurse said. “She’ll be right in.”

“Thank you.”

She left, and Ryland and I looked at each other. He gave me a smile that I was sure he meant to be reassuring, but I could tell he was nervous too.

“We might find out the sex today,” I volunteered.

This earned me a real smile from him. “I’m looking forward to it.”

The door opened, and the technician stepped inside. “Hello, Brighton. How are we doing today?”

“Good,” I answered.

She sat down on her chair and started messing with the equipment while Ryland watched eagerly. I wanted to ask him if he had a preference over boy or girl, but that seemed silly. I’d be happy with either.

“This is going to be a little cold.” She squeezed the gel onto my tummy and started to move the wand.

The room was quiet for a few moments while she checked some things on the screen, clicking away while she worked. I wasn’t scared, but I could tell Ryland was getting anxious by the way he leaned forward. He was waiting to hear the heartbeat, and it took a while to get to that part from what I understood.

Before I could stop myself, I reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. His eyes found mine, and he seemed to relax a little as he

threaded his fingers through mine. It was such a small, simple gesture, but it meant the world to me.

“Baby’s growing very nicely,” the technician said. She fiddled with some more knobs and buttons, and then the sound came through the speakers.

I looked at Ryland through bleary eyes as I heard the baby’s heartbeat for the first time. He kept running his free hand through his hair, messing it up while he stared at the screen with a dazed expression on his face. It was a mixture of terror and awe, and I doubted he even realized how tight he was gripping my hand.

“Sounds nice and healthy too,” the technician remarked. “Are we wanting to know the sex today?”

I looked at Ryland and he nodded. “Yes, please.”

His voice was hoarse, which surprised me.

“Everything looks great.” The technician finished up and wiped the gel from my tummy. “So I’ll show these to Dr. Maria and she’ll be in soon to let you know. Just lay back and relax, in case she needs to do an exam.”

I smiled and nodded, and she walked from the room. I didn’t even get a chance to talk it over with Ryland before the doctor came in. They were fast and efficient here. I guess that’s what money bought you.

She went over my chart again and told me everything was progressing normally, which relaxed Ryland a little further. Then we got to the good stuff.

“Okay, so I see a note here that you’d like to know the sex?”

“Yes,” I answered nervously.

Dr. Maria looked up at both of us with a large smile as she pointed at the picture.

“Congratulations mom and dad, it looks like you’re having a little boy.”

“A boy?” I squeaked.

The tears were leaking out of my eyes now, but they were completely happy ones this time. Ryland looked a little pale, but flashed me a boyish grin as he processed the news.

Dr. Maria wrapped everything up and said she expected to see me back in a month and to call her should I need anything. Ryland and I both

thanked her before she left, finally giving us a minute to digest everything that had just happened.

He stood up and locked the door behind her while I sat up to right my clothing. But before I could, he was back in front of me.

“Wait,” he pleaded.

I paused, leaving my shirt rolled up. He sank to his knees before me and lifted his trembling hands towards my belly, hesitating for the slightest of moments. He expected me to tell him no, but I didn’t. He splayed his hands across my belly and gave it a gentle kiss. It was undoubtedly the sweetest thing he’d ever done.

He pressed his cheek against me and just sat there for a moment, his eyes closed and his face relaxed. His warmth melted into me and brought on a sharp pang of longing. I missed these intimate moments between us so much. I wanted to reach down and thread my fingers through his dark hair. I wanted things to be good between us again. Without all the bullshit. Was that even possible?

“It’s killing me,” he rasped, nestling his face against my tummy. “It’s killing me that I can’t protect you, Brighton. That I almost destroyed the only good thing I had left in my life.”

I remained as still as a statue, but the tears were flowing down my cheeks. I didn’t know what to say. What to do. I didn’t feel strong anymore. I felt like I couldn’t go on without him. He loved me fiercely. Obsessively. Rivalled only by the intensity which I felt for him. So why couldn’t we be together?

“I can’t believe we made this,” he continued. “And that I almost took it away with my stupidity. I understand why you hate me, Brighton. I do. But, I don’t want things to be this way.”

“I don’t hate you, Ryland,” I murmured. “I could never hate you. Even when I really wanted to.”

He blinked up at me and shook his head. “I thought I could make it up to you. I thought we could get past it. But when I found out you hid this from me, I realized you really did hate me. There was no getting past it.”

I didn’t get angry at his words because I understood what he was trying to say in his roundabout way. This was Ryland telling me he was sorry. And that I’d hurt him. He’d never admit it aloud, but it was there in his eyes. Over the last two months, I’d watched the blueness of those eyes evaporate to gray. I’d watched him punish himself with whiskey and anger.

He was falling apart, and I hated seeing him like this. My normally faultless, beautiful Ryland looked so broken and lost. So fragile and disordered. Neither one of us could continue to go on this way. We had to figure this out, for all of our sakes.

“I hid it because I didn’t trust you,” I said in a gentle tone. “I didn’t believe that you were done with Brayden. And I didn’t want our baby in the middle of that.”

“It’s over,” he said resolutely, clutching his hands around my waist. “I’m done with it. I swear to you, Brighton.”

“I believe you.” I trembled. And I did. Seeing his face now brought me clarity. He would do anything to protect us. Even if that meant giving up his revenge.

His hands smoothed up my back and then down over my ass, squeezing me as he tugged me towards the edge of the table. There was still a hint of unease in his eyes, like he thought I might say no, and if I did, it would break him.

I reached down and slid my fingers through his hair, smoothing it back into place. That was all it took to bring back the familiar hunger in his eyes. He stood and positioned himself between my thighs, gripping my face in his hands. “I miss you.”

I made a noise in my throat, and he swallowed it up with a brutal kiss. I clutched at his shirt and pulled him closer, desperately seeking out his warmth. I didn’t even care that we were at the doctor’s office. It didn’t matter where we were, I needed him.

“Ryland,” I moaned.

“I know,” he whispered. “I have to be inside of you. It can’t wait.”

My lips found his throat as he unzipped his pants enough to free his erection and tugged my panties to the side. His hands felt like brands on my body they were so hot, and we were both being clumsy with our movements. His name kept spilling from my mouth in a desperate plea. I just didn’t want him to stop. I didn’t want to spend another day without him. Without this crazy love that existed between us.

Despite the roughness of his palms, he eased inside of me with gentle control. We both groaned, and then he paused.

“Is that okay?”

“God, yes,” I whined. “More please.”

He rooted himself all the way in, and then paused to stare at the place where we were connected like he almost couldn't believe it was real. I pulled him closer and guided his lips to my neck.

"It's real," I promised. "It's real..."

"Never again," he swore.

My head shook frantically as I agreed with him. "No, never again." *We would never be apart again.*

He feathered kisses along my skin as he started to move. It was a combination of slow and hard, like he wasn't sure how much I could take. Either way, he'd only been inside of me for two minutes, and we were both on the verge of exploding already. His hands pushed my shirt up over my breasts, groping them with his palms. And then pulled back to gape at them.

"Holy fuck. They're huge, baby girl."

I laughed. They weren't that huge, but they definitely felt like it. They'd grown a lot already.

He flicked his thumbs over my nipples and I whimpered. I was still super sensitive, and if he kept doing that I wouldn't even last another minute. Sure enough, the moment his lips latched onto the lace covered flesh, I started to spasm around him.

I had to clap a hand over my mouth to keep quiet, and Ryland spluttered in surprise.

"That was fast."

"I needed this." I pulled his mouth back to mine. "I needed you."

My words set him off too, and he twitched and jerked inside of me while he devoured me with his lips.

"Christ, baby girl. I needed that too. So much."

He didn't move from inside of me, and I was glad. His hands continued to explore my body, his eyes following their movements.

"You've never looked as beautiful as you do carrying my baby," he said. "There aren't even words, Brighton."

He didn't have to tell me because I could feel him swelling inside of me again. I didn't want this to end, but I knew someone would be knocking on the door any minute now. Ryland must have read my thoughts, because a moment later, he pulled out.

"Let's go home, baby."

Ryland held my hand as we stepped into the elevator. I squeezed back a little tighter than necessary as I waited to see what button he'd push. When he hit the button for his floor, I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

He didn't say a word as he led me into his apartment, but the moment we were inside, he pulled me into his arms. Soft fingers brushed my cheek while he searched my eyes.

"I need to know this is what you want," he said. "Because I'm all in now, Brighton. No more games. If you commit to this, it's for good."

"I'm committed," I told him without hesitation. "This is what I want, Ryland. You, me, and our baby. That's what matters."

He crushed me against his chest and kissed my temple. "It's all that fucking matters," he agreed. "And nothing else is going to change that."

I reached for his hand and started walking backwards, leading him to the bedroom. He smirked.

"I have a lot to atone for, don't I?"

"You have no idea," I said. "My hormones are crazy right now. It's very possible I might never let you leave this apartment again."

Clear blue eyes settled on me with a hint of amusement. "I couldn't think of anything better."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ryland

The weekend passed in a cloud-like dream as I nestled my favorite appendage inside of Brighton again and again.

See, I could be romantic?

Under a self-imposed lockdown, we didn't leave the apartment once. Phones turned off, business neglected, calls unanswered. Nothing else existed. She was back in my arms. In my bed. Back to letting me have my way with her. It was all going swimmingly.

We hungered for each other. Maddeningly. Obsessively so. But wasn't that the whole point? Weren't we all just looking for someone we could fuck until the end of time and chase those euphoric rainbows with?

For me, I had no further to look than the woman cocooned between my legs at present. Her cheek utilized my chest as a pillow without any protest from me. Strawberry gold spilled down her back in tangled curls that my fingers stroked lazily. The lids of her normally waifish eyes were heavy and drowsy under the weight of contentment. The steady thrum of my heartbeat pulsed beneath her, drugging her with its melodic rhythm.

I quietly speculated how long it'd be before she was asleep again. I wouldn't move. I enjoyed this far too much. Even with a dead arm and a pressing need for sustenance. Now that all was right in my world again, hunger had returned with a ravenous vengeance.

It was a toss-up whether food should be first on the agenda, or another round of marathon fucking. I thought I'd purged it all from my system only twenty minutes ago, but already my cock was stirring again. Briefly, I toyed with the idea of licking rum raisin ice cream off of Brighton's every curve and valley. Two birds, one stone.

The dilemma was effectively quashed when her fingers traced over the scars on my chest, her brow furrowed. That look meant she was deep in thought, which didn't bode well for me or my needy cock.

My palms held her against me in a bruising grip, just on the off chance she was rethinking this.

“We need to talk, Ryland.”

I kissed the top of her forehead and smothered my face in her hair. “No we don’t.”

My lips made a mad dash for her neck, but she stopped me cold.

“I’m serious,” she protested. “You aren’t going to distract me with sex.”

Grabbing her hand, I pressed it against the bulge in my briefs and gave her a boyish grin. “C’mon, let’s get frisky, baby.”

Nothing good could come of talking. I knew this, and yet, she pursed her lips. She usually liked it when I was being smart. Not this time, apparently. Christ, she really wanted to talk.

“What’s the matter?” I sounded more reluctant than a sixty-year-old nun, even to my own ears.

Brighton gave me that look in response. The one that told me to quit feeling sorry for myself and suck it up. So I stroked her back in encouragement even though I only wanted to fuck these thoughts right out of her system, whatever they may be.

“A lot,” she answered. “We have a lot to talk about. But first I want to start with the car crash.”

My spine compressed and the aggravation in my tone wasn’t well disguised. “No, Brighton.”

“There are things I need to know,” she insisted. “I can’t move forward until I do.”

The tension in my jaw burned all the way down my throat. Six months ago, I’d have told her it was non-negotiable. But as I’d promised you-and-her-I was trying to bend. Being master of your own universe isn’t an easy habit to break. But as I sought refuge in the depths of her hazel eyes, I recognized the significance of her need for this.

I rubbed the back of my neck. No doubt this was going to hurt like hell. I wished I had some whiskey. What’s more, some rum raisin ice cream. My first plan sounded infinitely better than what she had in mind.

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me what happened that night,” she said. “How you set it up. How it was supposed to go.”

The rational part of me understood why she was asking, but even now, I pictured her face that night. The blood and the fear. Everything

inside of me clammed up, and I felt like a junkie who'd missed his last ten fixes.

"I know it's hard for you, Ryland." She cradled my face in her palms. "But I just need to know."

She wanted to know if I had any idea she was in the car that night. I didn't. I'd never told her because it was irrelevant. Regardless of my lack of knowledge, there was no justification.

"You knew Brayden would come straight to me," she pressed. "If he came to California."

"I did."

She waited anxiously, and I searched her pretty face with my eyes. I was afraid to tell her these things. Afraid she'd only ever see me as a monster who couldn't be redeemed. Squeezing her hand in mine, I anchored myself with her warmth as I tripped around the words in my brain.

"I forwarded Brayden's number to my phone before I left that night," I told her. "Then had maintenance disable the elevator from reaching the top floor and lock the stairwell."

Her face remained a mask of stoicism as she processed my words. I hadn't a clue what she was thinking. The sadist in me demanded I put a stop to this bullshit at once. Her mouth had so many other beneficial uses than dredging up the past. It was fear talking, okay? Don't write me off completely.

"So Brayden wouldn't be able to contact me," she reasoned out loud.

I closed my eyes and allowed my head to fall against the headboard. I'd prefer her impassivity over disappointment any day of the week.

"I really did have a business dinner that night," I explained. "Mick was tracking Brayden through his phone. Neither of us anticipated you'd be there with him."

"So he didn't know I was in the car," Brighton whispered. "Is he the one who ran us off the road?"

"Yes." I swallowed. "I called Nicole during dinner, and she told me you were in bed asleep. She'd never lied to me before, so I had no reason not to believe it. Then Mick called me an hour later and told me he'd done what I'd asked. I met him there."

Brighton shook in my arms as all of my vile admissions spewed from my mouth like lava. I couldn't stop them now. She'd asked for it. I

wanted her forgiveness. I needed her to wipe my slate clean and anoint me with her purity again. I clutched her tighter, terrified to let go. She was too small and fragile.

“I had no fucking idea, baby girl,” I choked out my desperation. “I swear I didn’t. I’d never do that to you. You have to believe it.”

“But you’d do it to Brayden,” she answered. “You wanted to.”

“Yes, I wanted to.” There was no point denying it.

“So why didn’t you?”

I opened my eyes and gazed into hers. Even brimming with tears, they were the most exquisite colors I’d ever seen. The sadist in me thought the tears only made them more so. Crystalline blue tinged with balmy gray and honeyed amber. They held an entire landscape within them-where the mountains met the sea in a collision of drizzling rain and thunder. Nothing else in the world rivaled them. The windows to her soul, they often conveyed her thoughts so openly. But not this time. She was keeping her emotions very close to the vest, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“I don’t know,” I answered finally. Honestly. I didn’t know why I couldn’t pull the trigger that night. “I kept looking at him and thinking about you. About how much it would hurt you.”

“And what if you’d done it?” she asked. “Then what would have happened? What was the plan then?”

“I didn’t have one,” I admitted. Everything I’d planned was only about that moment. The rush I’d feel in those brief few seconds when justice was exacted and all was right with the world again. I wanted to taste Brayden’s agony. To feel its presence choking the life out of him like I’d felt that night. He was the only one who could pay up. The only one left to settle the score.

“So you weren’t going to try to cover it up?”

I hadn’t a clue why this mattered, but I answered anyway. “No.”

“You would have just gone to prison, lost everything.”

“If that’s what ensued, then yes.”

“I find that hard to believe,” she scoffed. “You’ve built an empire. And you would just let all of that go, just to kill Brayden?”

“My company was built out of necessity,” I replied. “I needed resources to do what I planned. Money, power. It was all a piece of the plan. Not the other way around.”

“So you spent five years working yourself to death, planning all of this... and now you’re ready to let it go?”

Her voice was tinged with doubt. I didn’t blame her. She told me earlier she believed me, but she’d always have her reasons not to trust me. We’d probably come back to this dead horse time and time again.

“I already have let it go.” I grazed her throat with my lips and inhaled her scent tangled with mine. My chest inflated with male pride that she smelled of me. That she looked so beautifully ravaged and thoroughly fucked, by none other than yours truly. It did things to me. And again, the importance of her presence in my life socked me in the gut.

“I’ll spend every day for the rest of my life proving it,” I murmured.

“But why now?” she asked. “You said you decided before you even knew I was pregnant.”

My thumb explored the curve of her pretty pink lips, coveting the tiny hitch in her breath when I touched her this way. “I did it for you,” I said. “I almost lost you. And nothing could ever be worth going through that again.”

She blinked away her tears and nodded in apparent satisfaction as she wrapped her body around me like a vice. “I trust you not to hurt me again, Ryland,” she whispered. “Don’t make me regret that.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Brighton

Ryland had all of my stuff moved back into his apartment. I didn't really see the point, since we'd be moving again soon anyway, but he'd insisted.

And although Emma had been very helpful for the short time that I had her around, he'd also cut back her hours. Now that we were living together, he agreed that I didn't really need someone with me round the clock.

It was a relief, and we had a schedule where I could call Emma if I ever needed her for the day. She seemed to be more than happy with the system as well, as opposed to sleeping on Nicole's sofa.

I was sewing a lot. Ryland's donation to Sophia's Shoes meant there was more we could do with it. Nicole and I were working on expanding and outsourcing some of the sewing projects. But it was still something I enjoyed doing, so I wanted to keep it up for as long as I could manage.

Now we were sitting in the apartment, at one of our weekly meetings to discuss the foundation. This was one of Nicole's ideas, but really I thought it was an excuse for us to eat dessert and hang out. I loved it.

"What about a scholarship program?" she asked, dunking a donut into her hot black coffee.

Her and Matt were both sitting across from me, and he was probably bored out of his mind. But ever since Nicole had warmed up to him being around, he was taking full advantage of it. I'd never seen either of them look so happy, and it made me happy too.

"What kind of scholarship?" I asked. "They're little girls, so I don't know how that would work."

"Well, I know," Nicole said thoughtfully. "But maybe we could expand into older age brackets too. We could even do a scholarship for a ballet school every couple of years if it fits into the budget."

I mulled over her words carefully before I realized how much they made sense. When I started all of this, I was only thinking of girls around Sophia's age who would have been nine or younger. But it wasn't fair to exclude the older kids who didn't have access to these kinds of programs.

"I think you're right," I agreed. "It sounds like a good idea."

"I'll do some poking around," she said. "And tell you what I come up with."

"Okay." I nodded. "So what do you need from me for the charity gala?"

"Well we're meeting with Alex Burton next week. He's interested in the foundation, and I have a really good feeling about this."

"Why does that name sound familiar?" I asked.

"Because..." Nicole glanced at Matt and then back to me. "It's one of Ryland's competitors. He's probably not going to like it, but this isn't about him."

"Oh."

I really didn't want to start poking the bear again already, but Nicole was right. This was about the charity and not about Ryland's business.

"I'm sure he'll understand," I said. "As long as we keep business out of it. This is just for Sophia's Shoes."

"Absolutely." Nicole grinned. "This guy is a big fish, and I want to reel him in while I've got a chance."

"How did you even get him to agree to a meeting?" I asked.

So far we'd been struggling to find big donors for such a small charity.

"Brighton, you underestimate me." She laughed. "I still have plenty of contacts in the industry."

I smiled too because I remembered the last time she'd said those words. It was because she was helping Ryland plan his revenge. We'd come a long way since then, and I trusted Nicole with all my heart now.

"Anything else?" I asked. "Do you need help with the planning?"

"Nope." She shook her head. "Got it all covered. I just need you to show up and smile while you mix with the wealthy and convince them to sign over some hard earned money to our cause."

"I'm sure with Ryland beside me it won't be an issue." I grinned. "He'll do all the work just by showing up."

“I think you’re right,” she agreed. “I’ve got a really good feeling about this.”

“Me too. So now that we’ve got all of that settled...” I folded my hands across the counter and took on a serious expression. “It’s onto the second order of business.”

Nicole wiggled around in her seat and clasped her hands together in eager anticipation. I’d made her wait for the news because I knew she’d be dragging me to every shopping center in a fifty-mile radius once I told her.

“Oh my God,” she squeaked. “It’s a boy, isn’t it? I just know it’s a boy.”

I kept my expression flat, giving nothing away. How the hell did she know that?

“I read online that if you’re carrying low it’s a boy.”

I knew that was an old wives’ tale. Still, I looked down at my belly and frowned. “How can you tell?”

“I don’t really know,” Nicole admitted. “But once I read it I thought it looked that way to me. Or maybe I just really want it to be a boy.”

“Well, then I guess you’ll be happy to know you’ve gotten your way?”

She clapped her hands over her mouth and then smacked Matt in the chest. He grinned.

“Seriously?” she gasped. “It’s a boy. Oh my God. We have to go shopping.”

Point made.

“Yes, Nicole.” I rolled my eyes. “We’ll have to go shopping. Maybe next week.”

“Tomorrow,” she insisted. “I can’t wait any longer.”

Matt gave me a shrug that said everything I needed to know. Just like Ryland, Nicole was used to getting her way.

“Alright,” I relented. “Tomorrow it is then.”

During the course of our time apart, I realized that I’d missed Ryland’s birthday. I felt horrible about it, especially when I learned that it was the night he came over to my apartment. The night he discovered I’d hidden the baby from him.

When I brought it up with Nicole, she told me he hadn't done anything for his birthday for the last six years. It broke my heart. Ryland gave me anything I wanted without blinking an eye, and he never made me feel guilty for it. He insisted that his money was mine, and I shouldn't have any qualms about spending it.

It still felt weird though, and I didn't like to go overboard on things. In a way I was grateful that he was so involved in the whole process. We didn't buy anything-whether it was car seats or baby toys-until he'd looked at all the safety specs first. Again, it was just another one of his freakishly adorable traits.

But when it came to his birthday present, I had no idea what to get him. Buying something at a store-with his money no less-felt cheap. So over the last two weeks, I'd worked on something else. Something that came from the heart. I had no idea if he was going to like it or not, but I'd compiled everything I could think of into a scrapbook of our time together. There were quotes and lyrics that reminded me of him, or things he'd said to me during our time together that I wanted to remember. I'd written him little notes about some of the good memories I had and told him about the first pregnancy moments I'd experienced without him. I wanted him to be a part of it, all of it, and to know how much I loved him.

I'd been sneaking photos of him at every opportunity I got, and even some photos of us together. He was surprisingly okay with that, and it usually led to him sneaking photos of me for his own private stash. When I'd found that he actually printed off a candid photo of me and placed it on his desk beside his growing collection, we had another memory to add to his office that afternoon.

Now I was at the apartment, prepared to finally give him the present I'd worked so hard on. I'd spent the entire afternoon attempting to cook him a nice dinner, and nothing was going to plan. By the time he came in, I was covered in flour and frustration. My roast had burnt, and my chocolate cake was under cooked.

I was going to be a terrible mother.

"Brighton?" he shot me a questioning glance when he saw the mess around me.

Suddenly, it wasn't just his birthday that I'd ruined, it was a whole lot of other things. I was a big fat failure, and I was terrified for my poor baby. Tears welled in my eyes and I tried to shoo him away. He didn't leave

of course. He strode right over and pulled me against his chest, no concern whatsoever that I was getting his clothes dirty.

He gripped my chin and tilted, his blue eyes searching mine.

“What’s the matter, baby girl?”

“I don’t know how I’m going to do this,” I blurted. “Moms are supposed to be able to cook for their children. I can’t even do it for you.”

He laughed and gave me a little squeeze, pressing a tender kiss against my temple. Then he grabbed my hand and led me to the sofa, gesturing for me to sit. I watched him unbutton his collar and roll up his sleeves before he sat down beside me and pulled me into his lap.

“We’ll order out tonight.” His fingers massaged my neck, making me forget my epic failure as his warmth seeped into me. He had such a calming effect on me when he wanted to.

“You don’t have to know how to cook to be a good mother, Brighton,” he continued. “And besides, I’m sure you’ll learn if you really want to.”

“It isn’t fair, though,” I protested.

“What isn’t?” he asked, brushing my hair back over my shoulders.

“You’re smart and beautiful and perfect, and you’ll be able to teach him everything,” I complained. “You don’t even have to try to be a good father. But what do I have to offer?”

Ryland stiffened beneath me, his palm pulling my gaze back to his.

“You really think that?” he asked. “You think I’m going to be a good father?”

I couldn’t believe he even had to ask. I knew he was. But there was a hint of worry in his eyes, and I realized I wasn’t the only one who was afraid. I gave him a soft smile and stroked his cheek, enjoying the way he closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. “An overprotective one, sure. But I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

His lips found mine, and he kissed me long and hard before pulling back with a lazy smile.

“Brighton, you’re going to be great, I promise you. You already have everything you need.”

“I’m afraid I’ll be like Norma,” I admitted. “I’m afraid I won’t know how to show affection or say the right things.”

“Baby.” He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed. “You have nothing to worry about. You aren’t anything like Norma.”

He didn't say it with anger or hatred, but just like he was stating a fact. And it reassured me for some reason.

"What was your mom like?" I whispered.

Ryland frowned and buried his face in my neck, holding me close while the silence stretched between us. I knew he didn't like to talk about these things, but I wanted him to. I wanted him to remember the good things about his family, and I wanted to know them in the only way that I could.

"She was incredible," he finally murmured against my skin. "Everything a kid could ask for. The whole cookie-baking, soccer mom, white picket fence Americana. A genius too."

"Wow," I remarked. "So that's where you get it."

"She was a senior analyst for Selvek Communications back in Chicago when my father met her. But once she had me, she gave it all up to be a stay at home mom. I asked her once if she ever regretted it, but she said it was the best decision she ever made."

"I'm sure she meant it, Ryland." I threaded my fingers through his and gave him a shaky smile. "I'm sure they both loved you very much."

"She didn't know how critical my father's finances were," he said quietly. "I certainly didn't. He kept up pretenses that everything was okay. He'd sent me to business school and groomed me to take over his company even though he was on the brink of self-destruction."

It was difficult to imagine why a father would ever turn to men like Frankie's boss for money. But when I thought about the position he was in, there was a small part of me that tried to understand. He had a family to take care of, one that he didn't want to let down. I never wanted Ryland to feel that way.

"You know that even if you lost everything, and we had to live in a cardboard box, I'd still be by your side."

He looked down at me with fiercely possessive eyes and a lazy grin. "I know you would, Brighton. But I'm always going to take care of you."

His hands started to roam, and I knew we wouldn't get anything accomplished if I let it go on. So I stood up and walked to the breakfast bar to grab his present.

"What are you doing?"

"I have something for you," I told him as I took my place back in his lap.

He stared down at the package in my hands with an odd expression before lifting his gaze to mine.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a very belated birthday gift.” I smiled.

He reached towards it tentatively, but there was a hint of impatience on his face. My stomach fluttered as I handed it off to him, and now I had no idea if he was going to like it.

“It’s nothing big,” I said. “So don’t get too excited... I just...”

He reached down and kissed me hard and quick to shut me up. “Shh... don’t do that thing.”

“What thing?” I asked.

“That thing where you try to make it seem like it’s nothing.”

I pouted, and he ripped off the paper, flipping open the book. When he saw the first page and my inscription, the smile slipped from his face and turned to something else. I couldn’t quite make it out, but I knew it wasn’t disappointment.

He was quiet for a long time as he flipped through each page meticulously, taking it all in while I held my breath. When he finally got to the last page and shut the book, I was already about to do the thing again.

“Brighton...” his voice was rough as he stared at me with cloudy eyes. “Nobody has ever done anything like this for me.”

My chest swelled with pride and relief as I ran my fingers through his hair, my eyes roaming over his face for what must have been the millionth time since I’d met him. He only became more handsome with each passing day. The blue of his irises were tinted with small fractals of shattered crystal. How easily they could change, and yet even at their darkest, they were a terrifyingly beautiful sight. Long black lashes fluttered closed as I traced the lines of his perfect jaw and nose with my fingertips.

How could someone so striking ever want to be with me? I still didn’t know. He was the embodiment of refinement, intelligence... he exuded confidence in spades. His body was a work of art in the nude or in his favored Brioni suits. Sometimes when I looked at him, I couldn’t comprehend that his beauty was real. That by his own admission, he existed solely for me and no one else.

A small part of me still feared that he would outgrow this attachment. That at some point, he would realize the girl sitting in front of him was less than he deserved. He’d done awful things, it was true. But it

didn't place us on an even playing field. I wasn't and never would be in a league with him. The intensity of my fears and insecurities threatened to snuff out everything good between us as I reached up and gripped his collar.

"Don't ever leave me," I implored. "Don't ever grow tired of me, Ryland. I won't be able to handle it."

"Fuck me," he muttered as he gripped my face painfully. "That is never going to happen, baby girl. Never."

He reached down and ripped my blouse at the seams, sending buttons scattering everywhere. Solid, warm fingers slipped over my lace clad breasts, making my head fall back as I gripped his biceps. I was so sensitive there that the slightest touch had me drunk with lust.

His head dipped and burrowed between them for a moment before he slipped my bra straps off my shoulders and down. His hot, wet mouth latched onto me, and a feral groan escaped my chest as I cradled his head against me.

He sucked me long and hard, flicking my nipple with his tongue while he murmured reverent words into my skin. He repeated the same process on my other breast, and I thought I might explode from this act alone. It was so intimate the way he sucked on them now, like he couldn't get enough of them. Like he'd love to stay there for days on end.

I would gladly let him.

I massaged his neck and shoulders and watched with hooded eyes as he took long deep pulls with his mouth. Finally, he released me with a pop and brought his hungry mouth to mine.

My lips parted for him and he swept his tongue inside, drinking me in like he couldn't get enough. At some point during the ravenous kiss, he lifted me up and bent me over the sofa.

My skirt came down and pooled around my ankles before his hands slipped inside of my panties and fondled my ass. And then he kneeled behind me, quickly dispensing with the panties altogether. His lips trailed over me, kissing every inch of my bottom while he squeezed the flesh with his palms.

His gentleness was replaced with the scrape of his teeth, and my breath began to quicken as I gripped the sofa with white knuckles. This was what I loved. What I needed from him.

His possession. His obsession. His need to claim me. I hoped he would never stop claiming me.

I moaned when he sank his teeth into the fleshy part of my ass and then soothed it with his tongue and a tender kiss. Gentle and rough at the same time. That was my lover in a nutshell.

He stood up and spanked my ass right over the bite mark, shocking me. And then his cock was rubbing against me, soaking wet with my arousal.

“You like that, baby girl?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes,” I panted.

“Tell me what you want me to do to you.”

“Fuck me,” I begged.

He laughed and ground his hardness against my ass. “Such a filthy mouth. I should punish you for that.”

A whimper escaped me as his hands gripped my hips, pulling me back against the engorged head of his cock. He slid partially inside without any resistance from my body and then held impossibly still. Pure torture. Hot fingers grazed the length of my spine, stroking all the places he’d marked me with his initials. I wondered if he was thinking of them now.

“Do you miss your trophies?” I asked.

His hand trailed up the curve of my back and over my neck. A tug on my hair and my gaze met his.

“You’re my trophy,” he declared as he thrust deep inside of me.

I whimpered and his fingers clamped down on my shoulders, an unconscious and unnecessary reminder that he was in absolute control of me. I loved that. I never wanted him to stop.

He pressed his body against me, the warmth of his chest radiating into my back. Somewhere along the way, he’d managed to discard his shirt without me even realizing it. This was how I preferred him. Skin on skin. Nothing between us. I knew he loved it too.

His fingers brushed over the pulse in my throat, letting me know he was there without any pressure. It excited me nonetheless.

“Tell me I’m the only one who will ever have you,” he whispered in my ear.

“You’re the only one,” I mewled. “You’ve been the only one. You always will.”

“You look so fucking hot like this,” he declared. “Bent over and stuffed full of my cock. Swollen with my baby. Christ, Brighton, it does me in just looking at you.”

His hips smacked against my ass and my moans vibrated all the way down my spine. I was so close, and his words were forcing me over the edge. His fingers reached around and played with my clit roughly while his other clamped over my mouth. I nearly buckled from the pressure building inside me and Ryland had to hold me up as I finally exploded around him.

My orgasms had been insanely intense the farther along I got, and this one was no exception. I was hanging like a limp noodle in his arms while he kissed the back of my neck and murmured sweet words. His hips continued to roll in and out in a steady, even pattern. His breath was ragged as groans ripped from his chest. He was getting close, and his hands tightened their grip on me as a telltale sign.

“Say the words,” he clipped out. “Say what I want to hear.”

I knew what he wanted. But this time I wasn’t going to give it to him. I was going to tell him what I wanted to say instead. I reached back and wrapped my arm around his neck, bringing his gaze to mine as he drove into me from behind.

“You’re mine,” I declared. “Only mine.”

Ryland cursed and jerked inside of me, his eyes falling shut as he released an almighty roar of sweet agony.

The minute it was over, we collapsed onto the sofa, a panting sticky mess. My head ended up in his lap somehow, his fingers stroking through my hair as he stared down at me with nothing but tenderness. This was quickly becoming my favorite part. The way he took care of me afterwards. Always.

“Happy, baby?” he asked.

“Yes.” I smiled against him.

“I’m going to make you happy for the rest of your life,” he whispered. “I’m never letting you go, Brighton.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Brighton

Nicole picked me up at noon and drove me to Alex Burton's office in the sky.

While The Bennett Corporation was housed in the historical district of San Francisco, Burton Corp was modern all the way. The building itself was nothing more than a heap of sharp asymmetrical lines that rose towards the clouds like a beacon of superiority. I didn't like it at all.

Perhaps it was my guilt talking. I hadn't told Ryland I was coming here because I had a feeling he wasn't going to be pleased with this development.

We signed in at the front desk and rode the elevator all the way to the top floor. The interior was filled with squeaky clean glass and chrome at every turn, and I was afraid to touch anything for fear of leaving a fingerprint. I remembered thinking how Ryland's building was fancy inside, but it wasn't nearly as pretentious as this.

Three immaculately groomed receptionists greeted us as we stepped off the elevator and offered us a drink. I accepted a bottle of water graciously as my lips started to stick together.

My foot bobbed up and down while we took a seat and waited. It had been a while since I'd worn heels and it felt a little strange. I was also wearing one of Ryland's favorite dresses. White with a flared waist. It was the only stylish dress I had that fit my growing belly. Since I'd been pregnant, I'd been shopping for comfort, not style.

Nicole was wearing a Valentino business dress, looking cool as a cucumber. I didn't know how she managed to stay so calm when my palms were sticking together.

"Quit fidgeting," she whispered. "It's going to be fine."

"I just keep thinking maybe this isn't such a good idea," I said. "Don't you think it's weird that Ryland's competitor has taken a sudden interest in our foundation?"

“He’s a philanthropist.” She shrugged. “Who cares what his reasons are as long as he donates to the foundation and spreads the word.”

I didn’t share the same confidence. But I didn’t have any more time to think it over because one of the receptionists appeared in front of us with a smile.

“Mr. Burton is ready for you now.”

She ushered us down the hallway and into his office. It was huge and completely ostentatious. The walls were a deep mahogany color, and they were filled with awards and photographs of Mr. Burton and some very notable faces.

When I swung my gaze to the real life version, I was surprised to find he didn’t really look at all like I’d imagined him. He was tall and lean and had dark appraising eyes and jet black hair. He oozed charm and sophistication, and his features were carefully schooled to reflect that, even as his eyes trailed over my body.

I suddenly felt very much on display.

“Please.” He gestured to the chairs opposite his desk. “Have a seat, ladies.”

Nicole and I both sat, and I wrung my hands together in my lap as he continued to watch me. It might have been paranoia, but I swore he hadn’t he even glanced at Nicole yet.

“Miss Valentine.” He smiled. “It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve heard great things about you.”

“You have?” I blinked.

“Of course.” He tilted his head back in laughter. “San Francisco is really just like a small town when you take into account this industry. I would have poached you myself if I wasn’t certain that Ryland had no intention of letting you slip away.”

I shifted in my seat and gave him a weak smile. His words were friendly, charismatic even, but I wasn’t comfortable with him talking about Ryland. And I wasn’t dumb enough to believe that my credentials were in high demand. Nicole must have felt the same tension because she brought the subject around immediately.

“Thank you so much for meeting with us to discuss our foundation, Mr. Burton. We are so very pleased that you’ve taken time out of your busy schedule for this.”

“Yes, well...” He tapped a pen against his oak desk and leaned back in his chair. “We’ll get to all of that. First, I want to know something.”

He was looking at me. I swallowed and glanced at Nicole. She gave me an encouraging smile like all of this was normal.

“What would you like to know, Mr. Burton?” I asked.

“What I’d like to know is...” He leaned forward with a charming grin. “If you’d share one dance with me at the charity gala next week?”

My cheeks flushed and I couldn’t hide it. Was he flirting with me? Surely he could see I was pregnant. It was blatantly obvious.

He held up his hands in a placating gesture as if sensing my discomfort. “Just a harmless dance,” he assured me. “I’ll be honest in saying that while I do appreciate a good charitable function now and again, they need to be beneficial for me as well in some way. And me being connected to your charity is good publicity.”

I didn’t see how those dots connected in his mind, but I didn’t really understand these things. Ryland was also forced to attend some events he’d much rather not because he said it was good for business. So I didn’t see harm in having one dance at a public event with this man, even though Ryland was going to hate it.

“Okay,” I relented. “I guess that could be arranged.”

“Perfect.” He grinned. “Once that’s accomplished, I’ll be more than happy to make a rather sizable donation to your cause.”

“Thank you so much Mr. Burton.” Nicole bobbed her head in excitement. “We really appreciate this opportunity to have you attend one of our events.”

He looked at me again and winked. “Believe me. The pleasure is all mine.”

Three days had passed since my meeting with Alex, and I still hadn’t told Ryland about it. I hated hiding things from him, but everything was going so well I didn’t want to ruin it.

The charity gala was on Saturday, and Nicole and I were out shopping for dresses. There wasn’t a large selection of maternity wear that I liked, and everything seemed to cling to my body too tightly. I grumbled in frustration as I shoved another silky gown back onto the rack.

“What about this one?” Nicole held up an emerald green dress.

I wrinkled my nose in response. Everyone always told me I should wear green because of my red hair, but it was so not my color.

“Well, I’m afraid that’s the last suggestion I have,” she said. “Should we try another store?”

I nodded, and we walked back out onto the street. There was a man leaning against the brick building across the way reading a newspaper. Normally, I wouldn’t have even noticed, but I’d seen him earlier while Nicole and I were having lunch too. That was all the way over by our apartment.

“Didn’t we see him earlier?” Nicole whispered.

“Yes,” I grumbled.

“This has Ryland written all over it.” She shook her head. “He’s so paranoid something’s going to happen to you.”

While my first inclination was to agree with her, there was something different about this guy. Mick often wore suits, but they were department store fit. This one looked like it had been seamlessly tailored to this man’s body, and I knew his shoes were real Italian leather because Ryland had the same pair. There was something suspicious about it because he didn’t look like a bodyguard. I mentally catalogued it as something else I’d have to bring up with Ryland later as we continued onto the next store.

By the time we finally got back to the apartment, I was exhausted. Shopping with Nicole should have been considered an Olympic sport. I set down my bags and kicked off my shoes before I went in search of Ryland. I found him on his weight bench, pressing out reps like nobody’s business.

Good Lord he was sexy like that.

He had the music up, so he didn’t hear me come in. For a moment, I just stood in the doorway and watched his biceps flex as he lifted the bar above his head. His entire chest stretched and pulled rippling down his abs from the effort. They were glistening with sweat, and I had the strangest urge to rub all over him. *Chalk it up to the hormones.*

With any other man, it wouldn’t have been sexy. But Ryland in this state had my panties clinging to me already. My eyes roamed over the trail of hair that disappeared into his black fleece track pants. I could see the bulge of his cock from where I stood, even though he wasn’t hard. I was

having a hard time tearing my eyes away from it when he looked up and caught me ogling him. I grinned and shrugged in embarrassment as he hit pause on the stereo remote.

He sat up and leaned forward on his elbows, rubbing a towel over his face before he smirked.

“What’s up, baby girl?”

I walked towards him and slid onto the weight bench in front of him, wrapping my legs around his waist and pulling his face to mine.

“Miss me?” he murmured against my lips.

“Every second of every day,” I answered.

He crushed me against his chest with a groan, pushing my dress up my thighs with strong warm fingers. “Do you want to take a shower with me?” he asked.

“No.” I shook my head adamantly. “I want you just like this.”

He groaned again and then nipped at my ear. “Such a dirty girl.”

He tried to lift me up, but I placed my hand in the center of his chest and pushed him back down. There was something about seeing him in this position, vulnerable to me, that I really liked. And I had every intention of exploring it.

His eyes flared when I leaned down and flicked my tongue over his nipple, tasting the salt on his skin. He made a strangled noise in his throat that sounded very much like approval, so I did it again to the other side.

“Put your hands behind your head,” I ordered.

He arched a brow at me and gave me that look. The one that told me he was always in control and I had no idea who I was talking to.

“Do it,” I said again.

“Someone’s bossy today.” He flashed me an arrogant grin as he reluctantly put his hands behind his head and watched me curiously.

I stood up and peeled off every scrap of clothing I had on, discarding it on the floor before reaching down to tug off his pants. His cock lay heavy against his belly, already pulsing with need as he watched me.

I sat between his legs and glided my hands up his thighs, teasing his balls with the pads of my fingers. Ryland’s eyes grew heavy with lust and his cock jerked in excitement.

I climbed over so that I was straddling his body and rubbed myself against him. I was already soaked with arousal, and I glided over his hard

flesh with ease, watching his eyes close and lips part as he instinctively bumped his hips up to greet me.

I didn't let him inside. Teasing him, I positioned him right where I needed him for the maximum amount of friction. There was something incredibly erotic about sliding all over his body like this while he lay powerless beneath me.

His biceps flexed and twitched, an obvious sign he was struggling to maintain his control. Ryland's nature was to take over and dominate everything, but I knew sometimes he liked it when I took that control away from him too.

I reached up and cupped my breasts and his eyes darkened, growing hungrier by the second. I was moving faster against him now, sliding along his shaft and grinding my hips down onto his. I pressed my hands against his chest and rocked back and forth while he rolled his hips to collide with mine.

"Christ, you're beautiful," he grunted. "I could watch you do this all day, baby girl."

His words sent me flying over the edge, and I closed my eyes as shudders wracked my body. Ryland grabbed me around the waist and pulled me forward, drawing my breast into his mouth with long, deep pulls.

I whimpered while he continued to grind against me, fondling my breasts like a man possessed. He really was obsessed with them, but I loved this newfound kink of his.

The next thing I knew, his cock was throbbing beneath me as he spilled himself across his belly. His lips found mine with a searing kiss before he sat up to hold me in his arms. I looked down at the red marks his ministrations had left all over my chest and he just sat there with a guilty grin.

"Someone's being very greedy lately," I teased.

His eyes were already heavy with lust again, and I could feel him swelling beneath me in preparation for another round. We were a hot sticky mess, but I didn't care. I pulled him against me and kissed my way up the hollow of his throat, tasting his salt and skin.

"I love you," I murmured.

"Love you too." He pressed his lips against mine. "So fucking much."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Brighton

The charity gala had finally arrived.

Nicole and I spent two hours doing our hair and makeup, and I was a nervous wreck as I smoothed my dress out in the mirror.

It was a floor length ivory lace gown with a bow around the waist that accentuated my bump and generous breasts. It wasn't as clingy as the others I'd tried on, and I loved the way it looked on me. Apparently, Ryland did too.

He stood behind me in the mirror, handsome as ever in a black Ralph Lauren tux. He was clean-shaven and sporting a fresh hair cut that swept into a perfect wave away from his forehead. The lines of his jaw were prominent-yet healthy-and the blue of his irises contrasted strikingly with the darkness of his suit. In short, the man was devastatingly beautiful. His eyes filled with so much warmth and tenderness as they roamed over me that the guilt started to eat at me.

I still hadn't told him about Alex, but he would find out soon enough. And I had every reason to believe he'd feel betrayed. I didn't blame him, but I just couldn't find the courage to tell him what I needed to. Especially when he was looking at me like that. Like he loved me so fucking much he couldn't breathe without me.

I turned towards him and wrapped my arms around his waist, leaning up on my toes to press my lips against his. His fingers brushed over the back of my neck, massaging me lightly.

"Nervous?" he asked. "You look it."

I gave him a weak smile. "I'm a little nervous," I admitted. *Because I haven't told you the truth. Please don't hate me.*

He threaded his fingers through mine and brought my upturned palm to his lips. "You're going to smash it, baby girl. I'll be by your side the whole time."

"I know." I brushed my hand over his cheek. "Thank you."

I knew Ted was downstairs waiting for us, but Ryland hesitated as though he wanted to say something else. I ran my fingers over the lapels of his tux, waiting for him to find the words.

“I haven’t told you,” he said softly, “but I’m proud of you for doing this.”

Oh, God. The guilt was unbearable. I could barely even look at him. I felt like such a horrible person. He was opening up to me, and I was about to spring something on him that was certain to make him angry.

“Thank you,” I squeaked. “But it’s not necessary.”

“It is,” he assured me. “What you’re doing Brighton, it’s really something special.”

I buried my face against his chest, my eyes burning with tears. Suddenly, I didn’t even want to go to the gala. Why had I ever agreed to dance with Alex Burton? It was just a stupid dance, but Ryland wouldn’t see it that way. Deep down in my gut, I knew Alex had an ulterior motive. I wanted to call the whole thing off now, but I couldn’t. So I opened my mouth to unburden myself.

“Ryland, there’s something...”

“Hey, lovebirds!” Nicole called out as she strolled into the apartment. “Are you ready? We’ve been waiting downstairs for you.”

Ryland reached for my hand, and the opportunity was gone. I gave Matt and Nicole a shaky smile as they led me towards what I was certain would be a disaster.

The event planner had really gone above and beyond. The Westin St. Francis’s ballroom was a sea of shimmering lights and white linens. Gold and rose accented the soft lighting, radiating a feeling of warmth and tranquility.

It was designed to make people feel comfortable. To open their checkbooks and donate to a worthy cause. But I felt anything but comfortable as I stood with a churning gut, scanning the room for Alex Burton.

The moment we walked into the room, Ryland had a bulls-eye on his forehead. Men and women were constantly swarming him, seizing the opportunity to shake hands and talk business if only for a mere moment.

The lucky ones got a photo with him, which I knew would do wonders for their own business relationships.

He worked the room well, introducing me to everybody that crossed our path with pride in his eyes. I smiled and laughed when appropriate, but I felt like I was going to faint at any second.

I spotted Nicole across the room and gestured to her.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I told Ryland. "I'll be right back."

He gave his nod of approval when Nicole came to escort me before he let me slip away. I barely managed to make it into the privacy of the luxurious powder room before I started to have a full blown panic attack.

"Why did I ever agree to dance with Alex Burton?" I whined. "Ryland's going to freak out. I just know it."

"It's okay, Brighton." Nicole waved it off like I was being silly. "It's just one dance. It doesn't mean anything."

"I know," I protested. "But I have a bad feeling about this. Why did Alex want to dance with me? He could have just talked to Ryland and gotten a photograph. Wouldn't that have the same effect?"

"They're old rivals." She shrugged. "I doubt Ryland would want to be photographed with him."

I sank against the counter and fanned my face. Nicole didn't think it was a big deal, but I had a sick feeling about the whole situation. "I should have told him. He's going to be hurt."

"It's going to be fine," Nicole assured me. "It's just a dance, Brighton. In public, at a charity gala. Not just any charity, but your charity. This is what's expected of you."

I took a deep breath and let her words sink in. She was right, of course. This was something I would have to do as part of these events. Just like Ryland had to attend dinners and functions he didn't always want to. It was just business. Right?

"Okay," I relented. "Freak out is over. We can go back out."

Nicole smiled and pulled me back out into the sea of people. We didn't make it very far before a familiar voice stopped us.

"How about that dance now?" Alex asked.

I spun around and found him standing with such an arrogant smile it made me wince. His face gave nothing but charm and sophistication away, but there was just something about this guy that set off all the warning bells inside my head. A deal was a deal though. I told him I was going to dance

with him, and I would. Three minutes of my life. That's all I would give him and nothing more.

"Okay," I said weakly.

Nicole released me and gave me a reassuring smile, watching as he led me onto the dance floor. He took up the perfect gentleman's stance and lead without an ounce of discomfort, which helped me to relax a little.

"Ryland seems very happy to have you on his arm this evening," he remarked.

I wasn't going to discuss anything to do with Ryland, so I made a point to let him know it. "How are you enjoying the gala so far?"

He smirked as though he were amused I had the guts to stand up to him. "It's as I expected." He gave a flippant shrug. "No offense, Miss Valentine, but these things are all the same to me. A couple hours of dreadful music and a dinner that I've paid entirely too much for. But at least there's alcohol."

I frowned at his words. Nicole had put so much time and effort into planning this event and she'd done an amazing job. For him to dismiss it so easily irked me.

"So you're really just here for a photo," I clarified.

As I said it, I felt the flash of several cameras going off around us. Apparently it was a big deal for him to be dancing with me.

"Yes," he agreed with a dark smile. "Among other things."

I was about to ask him what he meant when I glanced up to see Ryland. He wasn't just angry, but furious as he pulled me into his side. And all of it was directed at Alex Burton.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked in a scarily calm voice.

"Nice to see you too, Ryland. I was just taking your girlfriend for a spin on the dance floor." Alex winked at me. "Someone should. A beauty like her was meant to be appreciated."

The muscle in Ryland's jaw and his bruising grip on my arm were the only outward signs of his rage. To the cameras around us, I was certain it looked like nothing more than a normal conversation.

"Can you not see the baby in her stomach?" he asked. "Because I fucking put it there."

The possession in his words told me I'd stepped into something far bigger than just a couple of business rivals. There was obviously some bad

blood between them that went much deeper than I'd realized.

The flash of cameras increased around us, and Alex didn't miss a beat. He tipped his head back and laughed as though he were having the time of his life.

"No need to go pissing circles around her, old pal," he said cheerfully. "I think the whole world knows she's yours. A product of your own doing, from what I understand. You know, I have to say it surprises me. You better than anyone ought to realize how vulnerable that can make you, Ryland."

Ryland's cool exterior dissolved as he took a menacing step forward, and I glanced around the room in panic. Mick caught my eye from across the floor and nodded as he moved to intercede. Ryland was coiled so tight I was afraid Mick wouldn't make it in time. And to make matters worse, Alex continued to provoke him.

"You know, there's only so much money you can throw at a problem," Alex said in a low voice. "At the end of the day there is still such a thing as honor among thieves. Loyalty will buy you a helluva lot more than money ever can."

Mick finally pushed his way through the crowd, and just in time. I was clinging so tightly to Ryland's suit I thought it would rip.

"Get him out of here," I demanded. "He's not welcome at this event."

Mick grabbed Alex by the arm and he shrugged him off before smoothing down his rumpled tux. "No need for dramatics." His eyes flashed towards mine with malice. "I'll be glad to escort myself out."

Mick followed him, and Ryland shrugged me off as he turned to watch. I wanted to ask him what that was about. I wanted to ask him if I was imagining things when I heard the threat in Alex's words. Was he threatening me and the baby? I didn't understand.

Matt and Nicole appeared at my side, and I moved to take a step towards Ryland. He held up his hand with a dark look in his eye. Exactly the one I was afraid of. He thought I'd betrayed him.

"Not now, Brighton."

He glanced towards Matt. "Don't leave her side for the rest of the night."

And with that, he stalked from the room.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Brighton

The rest of the charity gala passed in a painfully slow haze. I didn't see Ryland anywhere, and I tried my best not to think about his hurt expression as I mingled with the guests.

The night was even more successful than we'd ever hoped, raking in tons of cash that would balloon Sophia's Shoes ability to help kids to epic proportions. I should have been elated. Ecstatic. But all I could think about was Ryland and Alex.

As we stepped outside the hotel, Ted was there to greet us. Just as I suspected, he'd already taken Ryland home. Nicole, Matt, and I piled into the backseat of the car and I wrung my hands in my lap as we drove through the city.

"I'm so sorry, Brighton," Nicole said sheepishly. "I had no idea that things between them were that bad."

"Me either," I admitted. "He's never even mentioned him to me before."

"They went to business school together in Chicago," Nicole explained. "And then they both started up their companies here. But I always thought it was more of a whose is bigger sort of contest if you know what I mean."

"I don't think so," Matt cut in. "That guy gives me a bad feeling. I don't trust that slimy smile on his face. And I know for a fact the Burton family is involved in some bad shit."

"Like what?" I asked.

"His father has been accused of racketeering on more than one occasion," Matt volunteered. "And some of his employees have a bad habit of going missing."

"Jesus," I whispered. "I had no idea. Is this in Chicago?"

Matt nodded.

"It kind of sounded like Alex was threatening Ryland," I said. "Or me. I'm not really sure why, though."

Matt and Nicole gave each other a worried glance before looking back at me. "I'm sure he was just being belligerent," Nicole whispered.

But even I could hear the fear in her voice. She didn't believe it for a second. Alex Burton was a powerful man, and for some reason, he had a bone to pick with Ryland. I would have to ask him about it. But first, I knew I had some groveling to do.

We pulled up at the apartment and Ted escorted us into the elevator. I said my goodbyes to Matt and Nicole as they got off at their floor and then rode to the top by myself.

When I came into the apartment, it was dark. Ryland was sitting on the couch with a drink in his hand, still wearing his tux.

I toed off my heels and walked towards him slowly, like I was approaching a wild animal.

"Don't, Brighton." His voice was ice cold. "Just go to bed."

I didn't listen. I knelt before him and rubbed my cheek against his thigh as I reached for his hand. He didn't pull away, but his body was still coiled with explosive tension. I hated that and wanted more than anything to take it all away from him.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't realize..."

"Do you know him?" Ryland asked, his gaze seeking mine in the shadows.

I squeezed his hand in mine so he couldn't pull away. "I met with him last week," I admitted. "He said he was interested in the charity. I didn't realize what kind of man he was."

Ryland released my hand and knocked back the rest of his drink. He was definitely pissed. Trying for another tactic, I moved my hands up his thighs, stroking over the bulge in his pants.

"Please, Ryland," I murmured. "I need you. Let's do what we do. Let's forget this."

"I can't forget it," he yelled. "He fucking threatened you. And I don't trust myself not to be rough with you right now. Go to bed."

Even as he said the words, I felt him hardening beneath my palm. He needed this just as much as I did, but he was afraid of hurting me. He would never hurt me, but he didn't trust himself like I did. He didn't know himself like I did.

I flicked open the button of his trousers and pulled his shirt away. He hissed in a breath and reached down to grab my wrist.

“Brighton.” His voice was thick with warning. “I mean it. I’m not in a good place right now.”

I shrugged his hand off mine and reached inside his pants to stroke him through his briefs. He was burning hot and hard as steel. When his head fell back against the sofa for a moment, I thought I had him.

Then his hand came down to thread through my hair and tightened painfully.

“You want to make it right?” he asked.

I nodded, my lips parting at the fire in his eyes. God, I missed that fire.

He stood up and dragged me to the dining room table, putting me lewdly on display before he shoved his pants down his hips.

“Open your mouth.”

I did. Reaching under my shoulders, he pulled me down so that my head dangled off the edge of the table. He fisted his cock and rubbed it against my lips, sullyng my lipstick the way he liked.

“Suck on it,” he demanded.

I obeyed him in the slavish manner I always did when he spoke to me that way. Grasping him in my fist, I milked out his pre-cum and smeared it across my lips before they parted and accepted him inside. The hitch in his breath and the flare in his eyes told me he liked it, even though he seemed to be at a loss for words himself. He loomed over me, observing with blazing eyes as I drew him in with long, slow pulls. He enjoyed this moment of gentle intimacy before he was rough. I never understood why, but it didn’t matter. I would take Ryland any way I could get him.

His fingers gripped the edge of the table as he leaned forward and closed his eyes. Tension radiated through his every muscle as he struggled to control himself. It wouldn’t be long until he gave up on it completely, and I wanted to push him off that ledge. I drew him deeper, harder, scraping my teeth against the crown of his head.

He rumbled his approval as he shoved the top of my dress down to bare my breasts. They rose and fell with excited breaths as he skimmed each mound with the palm of his hand. My heart escalated to a bombastic rhythm in my chest, my back arching up to accommodate his touch that I so desperately needed. I hated when he deprived me of it.

He was on me then, the darkness inside of him crackling to life as his fingers came to rest on the hollow of my throat. He pushed his hips into

my face and cupped the back of my head with his other hand until he was as deep as I could take him. My moans vibrated against him and his eyes darkened in response.

“Are you enjoying this?” he tightened his grip on my hair and tugged. “Do you like to provoke me, Brighton?”

I mumbled around him, unable to answer since my mouth was stuffed full of his cock. I couldn’t help my response. It was hard-wired into my brain to like this now. He’d done that to me. He’d made me enjoy every dirty and rough and depraved thing that he did to me.

“You betrayed my trust tonight.” He pulled out and thrust deeper with a grunt. “And I didn’t fucking like it.”

I reached up and stroked his thigh as my eyes met his. A silent apology. A peace offering. His body remained steadfast, over six feet of pure male towering above me. He’d never looked hotter. Or angrier. But I could see his resolve fading as his eyes roamed over my breasts like he wanted to devour them. And then my face. He massaged my jaw with the pads of his fingers and pushed himself deeper.

“Spread your legs,” he demanded as he yanked my dress up around my waist. “Show me that pussy.”

I obeyed his command without a second thought.

“Who does it belong to?” he asked.

I mumbled my answer around him again. *It belonged to him, of course.*

“Don’t ever lie to me again.” His fingers gripped my face possessively and held my gaze. “Do you understand?”

I tried to nod around him but his hold was too tight so I moaned instead. He hissed in a breath of air and gentled his touch as though he couldn’t help himself.

“Jesus, you look beautiful with my cock shoved down your throat.”

I reached for his hips and pushed him deeper.

Ryland lost it, and the time for talking was done. He held my head steady as he fucked my mouth hard and fast, sounds of agony tearing from his chest as he pawed at my breasts and reached down to stuff his fingers inside of me.

I could have come so easily, but this was about him. About purging his demons, and that’s all I wanted to focus on. I allowed my head to fall slack in his hands and immersed myself in the motions. On the sounds of

pleasure and pain that ripped from inside of him. I'd done that. I'd caused that torment.

I vowed then and there that I would never lie to him again, and I meant it.

As though he could feel my silent promise, his face twisted in agony and his lips parted when he flooded my mouth with his release. I was enrapt by the sight of him from this angle, and I knew there wasn't anything more beautiful than the sight of Ryland coming undone. His body sagged against me as the tension dissolved from his muscles, and just like that, my gentle lover was back.

I dragged in a breath of air when he pulled himself from my mouth and leaned down to kiss my face. He carried me back to the sofa and nestled me in his arms, tracing circles over my back. For a long time, we just sat there in silence, Ryland catching his breath as I listened to his heartbeat against my cheek.

After his breathing had calmed, I worked to unbutton his dress shirt, pulling it aside so I could feel his skin against mine. I coveted that feeling. That warmth and bliss only he could provide. I needed it more than anything right then.

"I hated seeing you with him," Ryland admitted. "You don't know him, or the things he's capable of, and he took advantage of that, Brighton. I fucking hated it."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you." I stroked his face. "I will always tell you from now on. I promise."

"I know you will, baby girl." He kissed me softly. "But you can't have anything to do with him. Ever. Not even for the charity."

I nodded in agreement because I was certain I wanted nothing more to do with that man anyway. "All of that stuff he was talking about, the thieves and loyalty. What did he mean by it?"

Ryland tensed at my question and buried his face in my neck. "I'm not sure, but I don't want you to worry about it. Whatever it is, I'll take care of it."

That was one thing that still hadn't changed between us. Ryland wanted complete honesty from me, and yet he couldn't seem to abide by it himself. I was too tired to argue with him about it, so I just let him hold and comfort me instead. But I could see the storm clouds rolling around in his eyes, and I didn't want that. He was going back to that dark place in his

mind, and we'd had enough darkness in our lives. I only wanted to live in the light from now on.

So I reached down between us and stroked him while I kissed his throat.

"Take me to bed," I pleaded.

He smiled down at me indulgently and then gave me a brutal kiss.
"Okay, baby girl."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Brighton

Over the next few weeks, Nicole and I worked on expanding the foundation's programs to benefit multiple age groups. I was five and a half months pregnant and growing bigger every day. Ryland still worked a lot, but he said he was restructuring things within the company so it wouldn't be this way forever. Whatever he was doing, he'd seemed more stressed than usual.

I knew Alex Burton was still on his mind, but other than to say he was looking into it, he'd been pretty tight lipped about the whole situation. It was Ryland's way of feeling like he was protecting me, so I didn't fight him on it.

Other than the time Nicole and I were shopping, I hadn't seen the guy in the fancy suit following me again. I figured it must have been a fluke and washed my hands of it. Mick went everywhere I did, and I was coming to know him well. He really was just a giant teddy bear, all rough on the outside and soft on the inside. Still, I had no doubts he could do some damage if someone ever did try to hurt me. I grew to like his presence despite the fact that he'd pushed Brayden and I off the highway on a night not too long ago.

At one point, he apologized for it, saying that if he'd known I was in the car it would have never happened. Of course, that didn't make me feel any better about Brayden, but it was clear by Mick's expression where he stood on him.

I still hadn't heard from him either, and it was making me anxious. I didn't know what he was up to back in Chicago, but I worried it wasn't good.

Norma and I visited once a week, and she seemed to be doing well too. She was still in the rehab facility, even though she'd already been there for a long time. Her counselors said that in her situation, the longer she stayed the better chance she had of making it sober in the real world. And

since Ryland could afford it, he had no qualms whatsoever about indulging this.

He'd even made an effort to visit her with me, and I was over the moon with happiness every time he did. I knew it wasn't easy for him. The longer we were together, the more I understood why. To him, a mother would do anything to protect her children. He had a hard time understanding where Norma was coming from since his mother wasn't anything like her. But even so, he seemed to be warming up to her surly personality.

And besides, seeing the two of them attempt to find some common ground during a conversation was quite entertaining for me. They were worlds apart, but they made it work. For me.

Even though there were still some very real concerns in the back of my mind, everything was going well. I only hoped it would last.

I woke to Ryland's lips on my throat.

He kissed soft trails up to my jaw while his hands deftly roamed my naked body. A glance at the clock confirmed he was very late for work.

"Don't you have to go?" I pouted.

"Not today," he answered. "I took the week off."

"You did?"

He hummed his answer against my skin before finding his way to my lips.

"I want to take you somewhere," he murmured.

"Where?" I arched into him, already drunk off his touch.

"I haven't figured that out yet," he replied. "Where would you like to go?"

"You mean like... away from California?"

"Yes." He gripped my chin and captured my gaze with his. "I want to spend some time away with you."

I smiled and ran my hands through his dark hair. I hoped our son looked like him.

"Love that smile, baby." He dragged his thumb across my lips, and they parted for him the way they always did.

I sucked him into my mouth, teasing the pad of his thumb with my tongue. Ryland rumbled and closed his eyes, his hips already working against mine.

He was so hard I expected him to push straight inside of me. But instead, he kissed his way down to my breasts. They were swollen and sensitive, and when he sucked my nipple into his mouth, I was already close to coming undone. His fingers found their way between us, and I rode his hand impatiently before he even had a chance to get started.

“Frisky this morning?” he smirked.

“It’s the hormones.” I tugged on his hair and shoved my breast back into his mouth where it belonged. “Oh, God.”

“Fuck, Brighton,” he murmured between mouthfuls. “I could suck on these all day.”

I would gladly let him. Lately, the slightest touches from him would set me off. But he’d been so busy with work it was hard to find the time to connect like this as often as I wanted. When I had to go without for a couple of nights during the week, I felt like a fiend by the time I finally got it.

The proof was in our current romp. I arched into his hand, eager and desperate for my release. I needed it so badly. Only Ryland could give it to me. It was never like this by myself, and I was damn certain it would have never been like this with anyone else.

“I know.” Ryland paused to kiss his way down my belly, and I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. *Did I say that out loud?*

“You know what?”

“It was never like this with anyone else,” he replied, cupping my belly with his hands.

The thought of him with someone else felt like a knife in my heart. I wasn’t naïve. I knew he had others before he met me. He was thirty years old. Of course there were others. Probably a lot. But it’s something we never talked about. Now the orgasm that had been so close seemed like a distant afterthought.

Ryland had my legs spread wide, his eyes feasting on the most vulnerable part of me. He looked like he was about to dive in, but I couldn’t let him.

“How many others were there?” I asked, propping myself up on my elbows.

He stared up at me in disbelief. “You want to talk about this now?”

“Yes.” I clamped my jaw shut.

He shook his head. “Brighton, that’s not a good idea.”

“Well that’s too bad.” My lip wobbled, and I was fully aware I’d boarded the crazy train as I got jealous over his past. This was definitely the hormones talking, but the fact he didn’t want to tell me made me think it was really bad. Like hundreds of other women had probably had him before me. I couldn’t stand the thought.

“Were you with anyone else while we were apart?” I accused.

“Baby, are you crazy?” he gave me his signature arrogant smile. The same smile that had probably melted panties off of countless virgins before me.

“Yes, I’m crazy!” I snapped. “I’m carrying your child and it’s making me crazy. That’s part of the package, Ryland, so deal with it. Now give me an answer.”

The tears welled up in my eyes, and all humor faded from his face as he crawled up between my legs and captured my face in his hands.

“Brighton, it was all over for me the minute I saw you on that porch six years ago. Since you came into my life ten months ago, I have not been with another. Nor do I want to.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question,” I protested.

“You really want a number?”

“You know mine,” I told him. “How is it fair that you get to know mine, but I don’t know yours?”

Another grin broke out over his face and I glared.

“This isn’t funny.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” He smothered down his amusement. “But in all fairness, you’ve only been with me. So it’s pretty much a given that I would know your number.”

As soon as he said the words, his eyes clouded over, and he looked like he was considering something else. “Unless there’s something else you need to tell me.”

“Don’t get all broody and possessive of me now.” I shoved against his chest. “Especially when you don’t give me the same courtesy.”

“I’m not fucking around, Brighton,” he snarled. “Have you been with anyone else?”

I smiled up at him in return. “Tit for tat, Ryland.”

He looked like he wanted to belt the shit out of me. I was sure if I wasn't pregnant, he probably would have.

"You know what I'm thinking." He leaned closer and fenced me in with his arms. "Your ass would be so sore tomorrow if you weren't carrying my baby right now."

I smoothed my palms up and down his biceps and watched the frustration dissipate from his eyes. It surprised me how quickly it had gone.

"You can spank me," I offered. "If it makes you feel better. I don't care, so long as I get a number."

"I'm not spanking you because you like it too much."

I frowned at his words. "You've hardly even marked me since you've been back inside of me. Don't you want the world to know I belong to you anymore?"

"What's gotten into you?" he rocked back onto his heels and sighed.

"I told you," I whined. "I'm cranky."

He moved up beside me, patting the space next to him. "Come here, cranky girl."

I went, of course. The way I always did. He kissed my forehead and stroked my hair, my face pressed against his heart.

"Before I tell you this, I need you to promise me you aren't going to get upset, Brighton. I don't need to lose any more time with you over something that's in the past."

"I won't." It was a complete bullshit lie. Of course I was going to get upset.

"There were five others before you," he admitted.

His grip on me tightened, and I released a breath. "That's it?"

He stared down at me in surprise. "What were you expecting?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "I thought it was going to be so much worse. Were any of them serious?"

"No," he said without hesitation. "Never. They were just a couple of girls in college and then after that it was no strings attached sort of agreements."

"Oh."

He rolled me onto my back and positioned himself between my legs again. "Don't deny me what's mine, Brighton."

"Okay."

He groaned and rubbed his cock against my arousal, squeezing his eyes shut as he pushed inside. And then he paused. I wiggled my hips, but to no avail. He wasn't moving.

"Jesus," he rasped. "You feel so fucking good, baby. Just give me a minute. You've got me all worked up here."

I grinned and wiggled my hips some more. My jealousy always got him worked up for some reason. He liked it when I was possessive of him too.

He started to move, bracing himself on his forearms as he brought his forehead to mine. He kissed me soft and tenderly before twining our fingers together. Our eyes locked, and then I shattered around him. It was the most intimate moment we'd ever shared.

Ryland pumped a couple more times before he swelled inside of me, filling me with his warmth. "I fucking love you," he choked out.

I brought my hand to his face and smiled. "I fucking love you too."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Brighton

I stared at the bungalow before me in a state of awe and disbelief. It had a thatched roof and was completely ensconced by palms and lush greenery. But it was the white sand and ocean view behind that really had me at a loss for words. The aquamarine water lapped against the shore no more than fifty feet from where we stood. It was peaceful and serene, and completely surreal.

“This is amazing,” I squeaked.

“You like it?” he asked.

“Are you kidding me?” I stood up on my tiptoes and pulled his mouth to mine. “I can’t believe that places like this even exist.”

He smiled and threaded his fingers through mine before tugging me inside. Since I hadn’t been able to decide on a location for our ‘getaway’ he’d picked it out for us. One week on Little Palm island in the Florida Keys sounded like the stuff dreams were made of.

Inside, the suite was decked out like a luxurious island hut. Bamboo shutters filled the rooms with an abundance of natural light, and I could smell the sea breeze filtering through every inch of the place. It was cleansing. Peaceful. Romantic. And it felt like a fresh start for us. It was so unlike Ryland, but seeing me happy made him happy. And right then and there, I made it my ultimate goal to get him to relax completely on this trip with me.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed. “This is exactly what I needed.”

“Anything for you, baby girl.”

He hauled me towards the bedroom without any more preamble and I laughed at his impatience. The room was romantic with a mosquito net draped from the ceiling and fluffy white linens piled high over the bed. A bottle of chilled champagne sat tucked off to the side, and I pouted when I realized I couldn’t have any of it. That thought disappeared when Ryland started to grope me in earnest.

“I need to be inside of you,” he murmured. “It’s been too long.”

“You were just inside of me this morning,” I retorted.

And yet I agreed with him. It had been too long. He pulled my dress up over my head and discarded it on the floor before kneeling down in front of me. His hands inched up the back of my thighs and gripped my ass, squeezing before he lifted me up onto the bed.

Next came my sandals, followed by him massaging my instep as he went.

“You can do that all day,” I encouraged.

“You like that?” he asked. “What about this.”

He kissed the bottom of my foot and I tried to wiggle it away from him. “Ryland.”

He kissed it again with a smirk and then proceeded to do the same all the way up my calf. When he reached my thighs, he nudged them apart and pulled me to the edge of the bed at the same time. My panties were directly in front of his face, and they were already sticking to my skin. Two seconds of him touching me and I was a panting, writhing mess.

He leaned forward and rubbed his nose along the cloth, inhaling deeply. I didn’t get embarrassed anymore when he did that. Now I savored these moments. The moments when he flagrantly indulged in his sordid whims and enjoyed every second of it. He took it to another level when he ran his tongue along the material and then sucked it into his mouth.

“You taste so good,” he grunted. “It’s been too long since I’ve had this.”

“I know,” I whined.

Since my hormones had interrupted him this morning, I’d missed out. I had no intention of allowing that to happen twice so I reached for his hair and pulled him closer. I needed his mouth on me, and I said as much. It drove him crazy.

My panties disappeared down my legs, and soon he was spreading me apart with his fingers. His tongue slid inside of me and I jerked against him. I wasn’t going to last. At all. Knowing how sensitive my breasts were, Ryland further sped up the process when he reached up to fondle them.

“Oh, God.” It came without warning, fast and hard, tearing through me and leaving me dizzy and gasping for air.

“You’re making my job exceptionally easy these days,” Ryland remarked as he stood and undressed himself.

I watched with heavy eyes and felt my arousal stirring again already. “Not really, because I think I’m going to be insatiable this week. You’ll probably need a vacation from this vacation by the time we’re through.”

“Don’t provoke me, Brighton.” He lowered himself between my legs. “I have every intention of giving you a very thorough fucking every day that we spend here.”

“Ever the incurable romantic,” I teased.

He pushed into me and dragged his teeth along my throat at the same time. “Do you want romance, Brighton?” he murmured.

It sounded like a genuine question, but I didn’t have time to analyze. My baser desires were taking over, and he was still being entirely too gentle with me. I sank my nails into his back and he made a noise of approval.

“I want you to mark me,” I declared.

He gripped my chin between his fingers and glared. “Remember who you’re talking to.”

His eyes had that look in them. The one that told me Ryland was about to take charge and totally rock my world. Or so I thought.

He started to move, in much too gentlemanly of a fashion, and it frustrated the hell out of me. The further along I got, the more he restrained himself. I understood his fears, but my doctor assured me it was fine.

“You aren’t going to hurt me,” I coaxed.

“Brighton.” His voice was thick with warning.

I smiled and pulled his mouth to mine, whispering against his lips. “Please, Ryland. I need you. This is what we do-what we’ve always done.”

My words seemed to melt some of his resolve, and I was glad for it. He kissed his way down my jaw and into the valley between my throat and collar bone. And then he sank his teeth into me with a groan.

He’d missed it too.

I tugged on his hair and panted against him, urging my hips upward to meet his thrusts. They were getting faster, harder, and I was so fucking happy I could scream. When my orgasm swept through me, I did.

My contractions set Ryland off inside of me, and soon he was collapsing beside me with a groan. He pulled me into his arms and spread my hair across his chest before he started stroking my back. His heart stuttered beneath my cheek, and I smiled up at him when mine followed suit. We were in sync again, and I felt like nothing could tear us apart.

I fluttered my eyes open and let the sun wash over me as the hammock swayed gently in the breeze. This truly was paradise. Ryland lay beside me, reading from one of the baby books he'd brought with him. I thought it was adorable how much he was studying up on this. At least one of us would be prepared.

"We'll have to start thinking of some names soon," I told him.

He blinked up at me, and there was something weird in his expression that told me he'd already been thinking about this. But I wanted to run my idea by him first. The problem was, it could either go very well, or very badly.

"I have one in mind," I volunteered. "If you'd like to hear it."

He shut the book and gave me his full attention. "You do?"

"Yeah." I shrugged and started drawing circles on his chest with my finger. He looked like he belonged on this island year round with his skin. I was jealous.

"Well?" he grabbed my fingers and pulled them to his lips, kissing them one by one. "What is it?"

He was being so sweet. I really didn't want to ruin this moment. But I also really wanted to have this name on the table. I closed my eyes when I said it so I didn't have to see his reaction. I couldn't bear it if I hurt him.

"I was thinking maybe Jacob Jackson Lockhart."

I felt him tense against me, and there was a long pause of silence. I still couldn't open my eyes. I was too chicken.

"Brighton," he spoke gently. "Look at me."

I did. And I was relieved to find his eyes weren't nearly as cloudy as I expected them to be. In fact, there was something else there. Something that looked kind of like a small glimmer of hope.

"I like it," he said.

"You do?"

"Yes." He kissed me on the temple. "It's just like you to think of something like that."

I curled against him and smiled. That went way easier than I expected. Things really were different between us.

"I just have one concession," he added.

I frowned, thinking maybe I'd spoken too quickly. "What is it?"

“The last name-it’s dead to me for a reason. I’ll never be Jacob Lockhart again, and our baby can’t be associated with that name either.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because...” He ran an anxious hand through his hair. “There are still people out there who could use that against me. When my father’s business started to tank, he made some bad decisions. I still don’t know the extent of them, and I’d rather not ever find out.”

“Oh.”

It made sense, what he was saying. But it also worried me. “So, would we ever be in danger?”

“No,” he said adamantly. “But I can never be too careful, and I wouldn’t ever take any chances with you, Brighton. I will always do whatever it takes to protect you, you know that right?”

I did know that. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Ryland would protect me no matter what. And it only made me love him more. “I know.” I nodded.

“You are the most important thing in my life, and soon there’ll be another. We’re going to be a family.”

His words socked me in the gut and brought tears to my eyes. I knew how much that word meant to him. And if I didn’t, I could see it clearly on his face. This was his second chance at life. And I would do everything in my power to bring Ryland Bennett happiness. We both settled back against the hammock, and silence engulfed us. It was the good kind. The comfortable kind. I was listening to his heartbeat, drifting off to sleep when his fingers trailed over my cheek and turned my face towards him.

“Do you like it here?” he asked.

“Of course I do.” I smiled up at him. “This place is amazing, Ryland. I could stay here forever with you.”

My words seemed to fill him with relief. But then he looked nervous again as he reached into his pocket.

“Brighton, we’re having a baby together. I can’t tell you how fucking incredible that is. I never thought I would want these things, but I do. I want them with you.”

I reached up and stroked his cheek. He looked so passionate about what he was saying I just wanted to tear his shorts off and bury him inside of me again.

“There isn’t anyone else I would want it with either,” I told him.

“Good,” he said. “Because I have something else to say.”

He paused for a moment and blew out a breath. I’d never seen Ryland look so nervous, and it was freaking me out a little.

“I want you to be my wife.”

I was dumbfounded, and even more so when he pulled a velvet box from out of nowhere. He held it towards me with the strong fingers I had come to love, and I realized what was happening. I felt dizzy, and I had to sit up. He followed with an anxious expression. I still hadn’t touched the box. I couldn’t seem to get my body or brain to cooperate.

“Brighton?”

“Are you... *proposing* to me?” I squeaked.

It was his turn to look dumbfounded. “I thought I’d made that clear.”

“There wasn’t really a question in that statement,” I remarked. It was such a Ryland proposal. I wouldn’t have expected anything different from him, nor would I have wanted it.

He looked at a loss for words, and it was the first time I’d ever seen him struggling with what to say. I put him out of his misery by biting my lip and nodding. “Yes, Ryland. I’ll be your wife.”

“Jesus,” he cursed in relief. “I really thought you were going to say no for a minute. Goddammit, Brighton I love you so fucking much.”

I laughed when he pulled me across his lap and started peppering me with kisses. He was like a little boy on Christmas morning, and I felt exactly the same way. My heart was going to burst with happiness. He pulled out the box and opened it, taking my breath away when I saw the blood-red stone nestled within. It was cushion cut and ensconced in black gold, and the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, apart from him.

“Oh my God, Ryland.”

“It’s a red diamond,” he said. “A little bit of darkness for your light.”

“Do I even want to know how much this thing cost?”

“No.” He grinned and slid it onto my finger with a heated flare of possession in his eyes.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his face to mine, kissing him deeply. I couldn’t believe this man was going to be my husband. It didn’t even seem real.

Ryland was hard against me, and I didn't waste any time reaching down to free his erection while he untied my bikini and tossed it aside. Thank God he'd booked the only suite with private beach access, because I didn't think I'd be able to wait another moment to have him inside of me.

I slid down onto him at the same time my eyes locked onto his. I was never going to get tired of this moment. The deep intimacy I felt when we connected in this way and he looked at me with that sense of pride and ownership. Some women might be disgusted by it. But I was, and always would be, irrevocably his.

I reached for his face and showered him with kisses. "I love you Ryland Bennett." And then with a grin, I added, "so fucking much."

Ryland frowned when he poked his head out onto the back deck and saw me soaking my feet in the hot tub.

"Baby, what are you doing?"

"Relaxing." I laughed.

He didn't seem amused. "You're not supposed to be in the hot tub."

"I'm not," I rebutted. "It's just my feet. As long as I'm not submerged..."

"I still don't like it." He walked over and reached for my hands to help me up. "Let's not take any chances, okay?"

This was Ryland's overprotective nature showing again. God help our poor child. Still, I smiled. Because I knew he was doing these things out of love. I stood up and let him lead me back into the bedroom.

"I have something else to talk to you about anyway," he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

He helped me onto the bed and then grabbed a towel, drying my feet for me as he spoke.

"I don't want to wait," he said. "But I know you might have something else in mind, so I'd like to talk to you about the wedding."

"Oh."

The wedding. I hadn't even thought about it. It was something most little girls dreamed about their entire life. But I didn't have a lot of people to invite to a wedding, and the only part I cared about was that I got to pledge my love to Ryland forever.

“Do you want a big wedding?” he asked. “With the dress and cake and flowers. If that’s what you want, then that’s what you’ll get, Brighton.”

He started to massage my feet, and I found it difficult to articulate what I wanted. All I knew was I didn’t want him to stop doing that.

“I don’t need any of those things,” I said. “I just want you.”

His eyes filled with relief, and the next thing I knew, he was pulling me across his lap, kissing the hell out of me.

“I’m crazy in love with you,” he murmured.

I threaded my fingers through his as he kissed his way down my throat, licking the red mark he’d left on me the night before. He wouldn’t admit it, but he was glad I’d pushed him to do it.

“I was thinking we could have it here,” he said. “On the beach.”

“Here?” I blinked. “Like this week?”

“Is that a problem?” he asked.

Geez, he really wasn’t wasting any time. I kind of loved that. The idea that he wanted to make me his as soon as possible.

“That would be really nice,” I agreed.

But then something occurred to me, something I hadn’t thought of before.

“Nicole would probably be really hurt though when she finds out.”

“I’ll fly her down here,” Ryland said. “Matt too.”

And just like that, he made my worries disappear. “Let’s do it.” I grinned. “Let’s get married here. This week. Oh my God.”

I wiggled around in his lap, and he smiled. “I’ll always give you what you want, baby girl.”

Chapter Thirty

Brighton

The rest of the week moved crazy fast once we started planning. Ryland took over all the important stuff, but I spent an entire day searching online for a dress. Easier said than done with the island's spotty Wi-Fi. I had it overnighted to Nicole, and she would be bringing it with her when they arrived on Friday. It was simple and beachy, and exactly what I wanted to say I do in.

I told Ryland I wanted him to wear a white dress shirt and gray slacks. It was what he was most comfortable in, and I knew he'd look amazing. He didn't need fancy suits to look good, he was always the smartest dressed man in the room no matter what he wore.

Even just thinking about our wedding night made me ache between my thighs. Either that or it was the residual effects of the crazy animal sex we'd been having all week. I wasn't kidding when I said I was insatiable, and Ryland actually looked exhausted.

I grinned as I watched him doze off in the hammock, the sun shining down on his bare chest. He looked so handsome I wanted to go curl up beside him, but I knew we wouldn't get any sleeping done. And he needed a nap. Whatever he was planning had taken up a lot of his time this morning, and I pouted the entire time he was on the phone.

Regardless, I knew it would all be worth it when I became Mrs. Ryland Bennett at the end of the week. It was still surreal. This thing that had started with so much darkness was now filled with light, and I had to wonder if it could last. I hated feeling that way. Like something might come and snatch it away at any moment. I needed to put those thoughts out of my head. I needed to leave the past behind.

"Brighton, you look so beautiful," Nicole gushed. "I love that dress."

I stared at my reflection in the mirror with a nervous smile. My dress was chiffon and ivory lace with a sweetheart neckline, and it hit just above my knees. It was perfect, and I couldn't be happier with it.

"Will you do my hair?" I asked Nicole. "I have no clue what to do with it."

"Of course." She ushered me to a chair and helped me sit down. "We have to do something with soft, natural waves. It's perfect for a beach wedding."

She set to work, talking over the bobby pins in her mouth. "I still can't believe this is real," she said. "Can you believe how far you and Ryland have come?"

"I know." I smiled. "It's kind of crazy."

We went from him blackmailing me and wanting my family dead to being crazy in love. It wouldn't make sense to most people, but I didn't care. He was my soul mate. He was my everything, and I wouldn't change a minute of what had happened between us because it brought us to where we were.

"Has he come back yet?" I asked. He'd been gone all morning, and I was worried that something would happen. I was starting to become just like him.

"Dear God, there's two of you," Nicole teased. "He's fine, Brighton. He checked in with me an hour ago and said he was on his way back. He should be here any minute."

Almost as if on cue, a knock sounded on the bedroom door, and I glanced around in panic. "He can't see me yet."

"Don't worry." Nicole grinned as she walked towards the door. "I wouldn't allow that to happen."

She opened the door, and my mouth fell open when I saw who was standing on the other side.

"Norma?"

"Surprise!" she threw her hands up in the air.

I was a little shocked when she ran over and hugged me like her life depended on it. We were still trying to figure out how this whole being sober relationship worked between us. There were tears in her eyes when she pulled away and held me at arm's length. "My God, Brighton, you look so beautiful. That boy won't know what hit him when he sees you walking down the aisle."

“I can’t believe you came,” I stammered.

Great, now my eyes were filling with tears too. The littlest things set me off these days.

“Ryland arranged it,” she said. “He wanted you to have your family here.”

Although she didn’t mean to, her words brought a dark cloud into the room. I swallowed and looked away. Because even though Norma was there, Brayden wasn’t. And that hurt.

“He invited Brayden too,” Nicole said softly. “Just so you know.”

“He did?”

I was full on crying now. I just gave into it.

“Yes,” Norma answered for her. “I tried to talk him into coming too. I’m sorry, Brighton, but you know he’s stubborn as hell.”

“I know.” I nodded.

It was for the best he wasn’t going to be here if that was his attitude. I didn’t need anyone trying to ruin our special day. But I still couldn’t believe Ryland had extended the olive branch. I was shocked, and it only made me want to marry him more.

Norma reached out and handed me a little blue box. “Ryland wanted me to give you this.”

“What is it?”

“Well, open it and see.” She grinned. “I’m guessing it’s some kind of jewelry from the looks of it.”

I reached down and opened the lid to find a white gold necklace with what appeared to be a heart wave. The paper beneath it confirmed it.

“Oh my God.” I clasped a hand over my mouth. “He had this custom made for me. It’s his heart beat.”

“What does the paper say?” Nicole tried to peek over my shoulder.

“It says, keep this close to your heart, Brighton, so we’ll never be out of sync.”

“Wow.” Nicole blubbered. “That is so sweet. And so unlike Ryland.”

“I know.” I choked out a laugh between sobs.

“I think you found yourself a keeper,” Norma butted in.

“I think so too.” I wiped away my tears. “Let’s make me pretty so I can go and marry him.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Ryland

Had you asked me six years ago if I'd ever seen myself in this position, I would've laughed you right out of the frigging building.

Me? Getting married.

Abso-fucking-lutely not.

I had one thing on my mind then, and that was revenge. How sweet it would taste, how good it'd feel. I didn't want any distractions.

But when I took Brighton Valentine for the first time, I completely underestimated how sweet she'd taste. How good she'd feel. Or how she would crawl so deep under my skin I'd never see straight again.

She ruined me. No doubt about it.

And yet, when I caught sight of her walking down the aisle towards me-a vision in white-I was prepared to fork over heart and soul. She could have what was left of them, until death parted us, because for me there was no other option. If I could've included an agreement that stipulated she wasn't allowed to give them back, I would have. But we all know how the last agreement ended between us.

Still. She was mine, always would be.

I practiced breathing, which I'd briefly forgotten, as my eyes roamed over my bride. Her hair had been kissed from the sun during our time here. A mixture of strawberry and gold, it fell over her shoulder in soft waves. All I could think about was running my hands through it and mussing it up. She gave me a nervous smile. The one she usually wore when she was on her knees for me, doing my bidding. My cock jumped in excitement, and I had to tell him to settle down. This was not the time or place.

I couldn't believe this little sweet was going to be all mine. After everything, she'd still have me. She maintained her stance that we were cut from the same cloth. Insisted she harbored just as much darkness as I did. She was wrong.

Brighton was all light. Everything pure and good and untainted, and I got high on her every time I tasted that nectar. How could I have ever thought I'd tire of her? That I could give her up when it was all over?

I was a fool.

She reached the end of the aisle and stood beside me. She'd never looked more beautiful than when she came to me willingly. Her eyes were bright and big and so alive it sent all the blood to my southerly regions. There was little choice but to lean in and steal a kiss. The officiant made a disapproving noise, and I kissed her harder. He could fuck right off.

"Ryland." Brighton giggled against my lips before she pulled away. Her cheeks were tinted pink in embarrassment.

Oh how I loved that.

The officiant did his spiel, and I heard not a lick of it. My eyes were zeroed in on my girl, impatiently awaiting that pivotal moment. In the interim, I found myself eye-fucking her and looking for tells. Did she really want to do this? Was she going to run screaming at any moment?

There weren't any big red flags, but the fear was still there regardless. It would be until the man said those words I desperately needed to hear. Upon further observation, Brighton appeared light and happy. Relaxed. Feet firmly planted in place. I was the luckiest prick on the planet if she went through with this.

She hadn't made a big production of it, which I was quietly grateful for. I would've given her whatever she wanted, be it gold confetti or horse-drawn carriages. But frankly, I wanted to get it over with so we could spend the rest of our life together. Also of equal importance-commencing the honeymoon.

The word flooded my mind with images. No need to get into the nitty gritty here, but I'll tell you they were good. The fact I'd been inside of her incessantly over the last week did little to quell the burning in my gut. This island had done her good. Pregnancy glow in full swing, she was more radiant than I even deemed myself worthy of. That was a given, of course.

She'd chosen an ivory lace dress. How fitting. My sly little fox knew how much I loved the color on her. On point, her lashes fluttered as a mischievous smile lit up her face. I wondered if she had any notion what was bouncing around my brain. Perhaps she was having her own dirty little thoughts. I had corrupted her after all.

“Ryland.” Her eyes danced with laughter as she nudged me in the side.

Oh, right.

I redirected my attention to the officiant who shot me a chafed look before repeating himself. I recited the words he told me to like a good little minion, unaware of what they even were. It was of little consequence. There were no words somebody else could write that’d ever pronounce my love for Brighton. My promises to her.

Left to my own devices, I’d voice in no uncertain terms the debauchery we’d be getting up to for the rest of our lives. How she’d be swollen with my children again and again until she forbade me from doing so. There could’ve been gallant paragraphs uttered about how I’d forfeit my life before ever allowing her harm. How I’d never stray or break a promise to her again. Lastly, I most certainly wouldn’t touch a single hair on her brother’s cuntish head. But I knew Brighton would want the carefully constructed words in front of our friends. The supplementary vows could be whispered later when I was deep inside of her.

We got to the part with the rings, and I grinned when panic flashed across her face. She stared down at the little white pillow with parted lips, only now realizing there wasn’t one for me. I milked it out a few seconds longer than necessary so my evil counterpart could watch her blush again.

Hard as a rock in my trousers, I pompously displayed my hand. The warmth of her fingers traced over the fresh tattoo and tears welled in her eyes.

“My heartbeat?” she squeaked.

I nodded and squeezed her hands in mine.

“Oh, God,” she blubbered to the officiant. “I’m going to lose it, so you better wrap this up.”

He smiled and said the words I never thought I’d hear. We were now husband and wife.

“I love you.” I smashed my lips against hers and tasted the salt of her tears. “So fucking much.”

“I love you too, Ryland. More than anything.”

Fuck, yeah. No take backs, Brighton. I’m all yours.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Brighton

“How long do you think we have to stay and keep mingling?” I asked.

Ryland paused and shot me a worried expression. “Are you getting tired?”

I smiled and shook my head. “No, I was just wondering when I can take my husband back to our room.”

He laughed and continued to hold me in his arms while we moved in time to the music. “Someone’s being greedy. You know how much I like that.”

I glanced at Matt and Nicole as they danced beside us, and I’d never seen her look happier. I hoped that it would last. I hoped that all the bumpiness was behind us now.

Norma danced with Ted, who’d made the journey to Florida as well. It took me by surprise at first though it probably shouldn’t have. He was the closest thing Ryland had to family. My heart squeezed in my chest when I looked up into his blue eyes. He looked as at peace as I’d ever seen him and I wanted him to stay that way forever.

Almost as if he could sense my train of thought, a dark look passed over his face.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said quietly. “I’m just... happy, baby girl.”

I nodded and swallowed down my fears. He didn’t have to say anything else because I knew his were the same. He’d told me once that happiness was fleeting, and as much as I didn’t want to believe that, I had to wonder if it was true.

I couldn’t let any of those thoughts have real estate inside of my brain. Ryland and I had a fresh start, and I wanted to put everything else behind us.

“Come on.” He reached down and threaded his fingers through mine. “I think we’ve mingled long enough.”

“Brighton, tell me what’s wrong.”

Ryland sounded worried, but he had no reason to be. I wrung my hands together and bit my lip to keep my voice from shaking. “It’s nothing. I’ll be out in just a minute.”

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, wondering for the hundredth time if this was ridiculous. I’d never worn lingerie in my life. Well, not like this anyway.

The sheer white babydoll that looked great in the photos online only served to flaunt my growing belly, and I wondered if Ryland would even find it remotely sexy. The larger I got, the more I started to worry that at some point he would stop finding me sexy at all. I knew it was a ridiculous train of thought. I was growing a human, and my body had to change to accommodate that. But whether it was logical or not, those fears were still there.

“Brighton,” Ryland’s voice carried from the other side of the door. “If there’s something wrong, just tell me.”

I took a deep breath and twisted the knob.

His eyes met mine and then trailed down my body. I realized it was silly of me to worry because right away I saw the hunger he couldn’t hide.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” He gripped my hips in his hands and tugged me closer. My belly bumped against his and I laughed.

“I was nervous,” I admitted.

“Why, baby?”

His hands smoothed up my sides and then dipped beneath the silk cups to play with my breasts. I could hardly think when he did that.

“I just didn’t know if you would like it,” I said. “Because I’m getting bigger, and I feel weird about it.”

“Brighton.” He burrowed into my neck and wrapped his hands around my waist to squeeze my ass. “You’re having my baby. You couldn’t be any sexier if you tried. You’re supposed to get bigger. I want you to get bigger. I want you healthy and happy. I’ll never stop thinking you’re beautiful, you only grow more so every day.”

I reached up on my toes and pulled his lips to mine, kissing him softly. “Thank you, Ryland. For everything that you’ve done this week. For today. I can’t believe you’re my husband.”

“Say it again,” he pleaded.

“My husband,” I whispered, clasping his face in my hands. “My gorgeous husband.”

“I want you to say that every time I make you come tonight,” he ordered.

He was so serious as he said it I couldn’t help but smile and nod. Of course I would give into him. I always did.

“Take me to bed now,” I begged.

“Married five minutes and already acting like the boss,” he smirked.

I shoved him on the chest and pushed him back against the bed. “Take your clothes off.”

This time he didn’t hesitate to do my bidding. His eyes roamed over me as I positioned myself on the bed and watched him unbutton his dress shirt and kick off his pants. He was perfectly comfortable in his nakedness when he prowled towards me. But then again, he had a reason to be. He was perfect.

He started at my feet, massaging them the way he did often now. And then he pulled them both up to kiss each instep. This was a new kink of his I was starting to see a lot of lately, but I didn’t mind since I’d just taken a shower this time. I wiggled my toes, and he sucked them into his mouth, teasing them as he watched me. Already I was soaking wet and ready for him, but that wasn’t new. I didn’t think there was much he couldn’t do with his mouth that wouldn’t get me this way.

He kissed his way up my calves and thighs, rubbing his face against the sensitive skin until it turned pink. Even though he’d shaved this morning, he was already sporting some stubble. Since he’d discovered I was pregnant, he was much more careful in the ways he went about marking me. This was one of his new favorites. I didn’t mind at all.

He reached the lacey white thong between my legs and gave it a tug with his teeth. It disintegrated into several scraps of material that he tossed aside without any care. Then his heavy lidded eyes descended as he prodded me with his fingers, spreading me apart for him to see. He blew out a breath, and it tickled me, but it wasn’t enough. I needed his mouth on me.

“Ryland.” I tugged on his hair, but he didn’t budge.

“Shhh,” he whispered. “I’m enjoying this.”

He teased me with one finger, sliding in and out with deliberate slowness. I rocked my pelvis down to greet him, desperate for more. It

wasn't fair that he acted as though he had all the time in the world. I needed him, and I needed him now.

"This is the first time I'm ever going to fuck you as my wife," he said. "Let me savor it."

"Fine." I pouted.

I felt him smile against me, and then his tongue slid right up my center, exactly where I needed him. My hands tightened their grip in his hair, and I bucked against him. He groaned.

Ryland liked it when I was rough with him, but I didn't even mean to be. It was out of my control. He gripped my hips in his hands and rolled them in circles, helping me to grind down on his face as he lapped at me furiously.

"Oh god oh god oh god," I whimpered, squeezing the sheets in my fist. "Right there, oh shit!"

The onslaught of convulsions blindsided me with a wave of dizziness that simultaneously stole my breath and left me gasping. I didn't even have a chance to fulfill his earlier request, but he seemed to have forgotten all about it as he kissed his way up my stomach. When he reached my breasts, he paused his excursion to suck each of them into his mouth.

"You're getting a very filthy mouth," he murmured against me.

"I don't care," I panted.

He grinned up at me and sat back on his heels, looking deep in thought for a moment.

"What are you doing?"

"Just thinking about how I want to take you," he said. "I always feel like I'm crushing you now."

"You're not." I reached for his hand and squeezed. "But you could take me from behind if you want."

He grinned down at me and stood up, pulling my hips towards the edge of the bed. "I could, but I want to look at you," he said. "I want to see your face the first time I slide inside of you as your husband."

It was my turn to moan. Those words were definitely the most erotic thing he'd ever said.

He wrapped my legs around his waist and rubbed the head of his cock against my arousal.

"You ready?" he asked.

"I'm ready," I agreed. "Always."

He sank inside of me and closed his eyes for a brief moment the way he always did when he entered me. I loved that expression, and I knew I would never get enough of it.

“You good?” he asked as he rolled his hips inside of me.

“So good,” I murmured.

He leaned down and kissed me, and there was nothing frenzied about us anymore. It was unhurried and gentle. Ryland wanted to draw it out as long as he could, and I was grateful he had. I never wanted to forget this moment for all of my life.

“I’m going to come inside you, baby,” he declared. “Come inside my fucking wife.”

And with a roar, he did.

Then he leaned down and kissed me with a possessive gleam in his eyes. “Mine.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ryland

Brighton and I had been home for a little over a week. The amount of work on my desk was beyond fucking ridiculous, and I knew I'd be waist deep in it for the next two days. But the moment my email pinged from the PI in Chicago, everything else fell by the wayside. Images of Brayden filled my screen, and every vile and uncouth word I'd ever learned spewed from my mouth.

You might wonder why I hated him so much. Besides the obvious—he'd held a gun to my head and allowed my sister to die mercilessly—the boy was nothing more than a cockroach. Back in my scheming days, Brighton wasn't the only subject of my research. If you'd ever read the Art of War or any stratagem books for that matter, there was one very important principle you should have reaped. Know your opponent. Simple, really. Much simpler when you have the resources to fund such ventures and grease a few palms along the way. For my plan to work, I had to be well versed on the inner workings of the entire Gallo circle. Brayden included.

What I'd unraveled about him in my research was nothing short of what I'd expect of Frankie's son. Calling into question the whole nature versus nurture debacle, it seemed nature had won out in these circumstances. I'd venture a guess that Brighton had been kept in the dark on a few things concerning her brother. It certainly wasn't my place to tell her. As much as I liked to skew the cards in my favor, I wouldn't do it that way.

Brayden had a penchant for taking things which didn't belong to him. After a spate of breakins and small time robberies in his neighborhood, the police brought him in for questioning at the tender age of ten. It doesn't take long to conclude what Norma would've done in these circumstances. Calling in his absentee father to play the role of bad cop was probably what she had in mind.

She should've known Brayden's proclivities would only do his father proud. Over the years he progressed to other petty crimes. Eventually

even working his way up to wheeling and dealing for Alfredo's henchmen. Curiosity had me questioning how exactly Frankie weaseled him into the fold. There was no way he'd ever admit ownership over a *Mick*. Or at least, he hadn't, until he'd thrown both his children under the bus in a last ditch effort to save himself.

Either way, Alfredo had never met him directly. No small feat, considering how selective the man was of his crew. But apparently Frankie had some authority in the matter and grandfathered him in on his word alone. It was a decision that ended up costing him his life and left an ever present countdown on his children's.

Had I been in Brayden's shoes, it was difficult to imagine what I would've done. To his credit, he'd kept a roof over Brighton's head for many years when Norma couldn't possibly. But I couldn't abide by his decisions to fall in line with his piece of shit father.

This was his second chance. An opportunity to set his head straight and pat himself on the back for lessons learned. But do you think he could manage that?

I'll give you one craptastic guess.

He'd taken a meeting with Frankie's wife, which could only mean one thing. He wanted in. She was the only contact he had for Frankie's boss Alfredo. And he hadn't a fucking clue of the hive he was about to disrupt.

While Maria Gallo had given a first class performance on playing the grieving widow, in truth she hated Frankie's guts. She was glad to see him dead, and would be equally delighted to see his bastard spawn dead too.

But just like everyone else in this world, she had a price. She was another name on my long list of yearly installments. Her careless indifference on this matter was bought and paid for to the tune of a hundred grand thus far. And while she might have been a money hungry scab, she wasn't stupid. Maria knew when to keep her mouth shut, and when to talk.

And Brayden tumbling head first into her world would leave her no other choice. No amount of money in the world would salvage her life if Alfredo Zucco found out she'd betrayed him. She hadn't a clue about our agreement, but even if she had, it wouldn't stop her from singing like a canary in this instance. It'd been a carefully balanced juggling act to keep all of them content this long. Leave it to Brayden to come in and ignite the fuse.

On my part, there wouldn't be an ounce of sleep lost when he buried himself in a dumpster. But now his decisions were going to affect Brighton. My wife.

Which left me fuck all choice.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Brighton

Something was up with Ryland, and I didn't like it one bit. Now here we stood, the familiar pull of lies and secrets threatening to burst the perfect bubble we'd created.

"What kind of business trip?" I pushed.

He looked frustrated with my questions, but I didn't care.

"I'm pregnant now," I said. Yeah, I was playing that card. "You can't just go running all over the country without telling me where you're going to be."

"Brighton," he sighed and pulled me into his arms. "Believe me, this is the last thing I want to do. I want to be here, buried deep inside of you, but I can't."

"Tell me where you're going," I insisted. "You're my husband now. We're not supposed to have any secrets."

He looked guilty, and it only made me more suspicious.

"If I tell you, you're going to assume the worst," he said.

"I won't," I promised. "Just tell me."

He zipped up his suitcase and sighed. "I have to go to Chicago."

"Oh."

Instantly, I had a million questions running through my mind. He was right. I was assuming the worst, and I hated that. I didn't want to.

"For business," I clarified.

"Yes." He looked away. "It's just some old, unresolved issues. Some checks that need to be cashed, things like that."

I didn't know the nature of Ryland's business, so I couldn't say one way or another if he was lying. But I highly suspected he wasn't telling me the full truth. I knew his dad worked out of Chicago, and they often flew back and forth from California to Illinois. I hoped that maybe it had something to do with that. But I promised Ryland I was going to trust him, and that's exactly what I needed to do.

"Okay." I frowned. "And you'll come back as soon as you can?"

“The minute I can,” he agreed. “I’m out of there.”

He bent down and kissed my belly and then back up to kiss my lips.

“Take care of our baby, baby.”

I smiled in spite of myself. “Come back to me. Soon.”

“Always,” he promised.

Before Ryland left, he’d asked Nicole to come up and stay with me. I didn’t need babysitting, but I was glad she was there. It had been a while since we’d spent time together with just the two of us. We ordered takeout and took up residence on the sofa, watching nothing but romance movies for six hours straight. Even still, we were both on edge, and I knew what my reasons were, but not hers.

Finally, I reached for the remote and paused the TV. “What’s up, Nicole?”

“Huh?” she blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You’re all nervous and fidgety,” I said. “I can always tell.”

“Well, so are you,” she grumbled. “Geez, neither one of us can relax.”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours,” I volunteered.

She let her head fall back against the sofa and blew the hair out of her eyes. “Okay.”

I waited patiently for her to formulate the words. It always took Nicole a while. Something I’d come to know well.

“Matt and I have been seeing a lot of each other,” she said. “But we still haven’t... *you know*.”

“Really?” I asked. “I had no idea. You guys have been going pretty strong now for the last couple of months.”

“I know,” she whined. “Everything is so good. And I know he wants to, but he’s being patient for me. And I’m so nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?” I asked. “Haven’t you... er... haven’t..”

“Yes, Brighton.” She laughed. “My God, I’m not a virgin. But the only guy I’ve ever been with is Jackson and that was so long ago. I’m just scared.”

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. Something else Nicole was getting better at was allowing people to comfort her when she needed

it.

“Tell me why you’re scared,” I suggested. “Is it because you’re afraid it’s going to feel wrong?”

“No.” She picked at her nail absently. “It’s not that. We’ve gotten past that I think, for the most part. But it’s just that Matt’s built me up to be this great thing inside of his head, and what if I’m not? What if this screws everything up somehow?”

My heart squeezed as I gave her a knowing smile. Her and Ryland were so much more alike than they could ever know. They were both afraid of losing the people they loved again and I didn’t blame them. But I also wasn’t certain how to reassure her. Regardless, I would do the best I could.

“Look, Nicole,” I said. “You can spend the rest of your life worrying about something potentially bad happening, or you can make the most of every moment you have together. I know that might be easier said than done, but none of us can ever know what’s in store for us. We just have to make the best of the situation we’re in and hope it works out.”

“I guess I never thought of it that way,” she admitted.

“But you love Matt, right?”

“I do,” she agreed.

“So you could be spending your time being happy with the man you love, or you can spend your time worrying about what the future holds. What sounds better?”

She grinned and gave me a playful shove on my shoulder. “Obviously the first one. You make it sound so easy.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s probably not that easy. But there are no guarantees for anybody. I worry every day that something bad is going to happen. Because I’m so ridiculously freaking happy with Ryland right now it hurts. And I don’t ever want that to be taken away from me.”

“You are happy.” She smiled. “I love that. I love how happy both of you are. It inspires me to believe I can have it too.”

“You already do,” I assured her. “Matt is crazy about you. And taking things to the next level is only going to make him crazier. I’m sure of it.”

“Oh okay.” She bounced around on the couch and grinned. “Now you’re making me all giddy. I’m going to do this. You’re right, I don’t know what I’m so afraid of.”

“Good.” I grinned. “But I don’t want all the gory details when you do. I consider Matt to be like a brother.”

“Fair enough,” she agreed. “I already know way more about Ryland’s sex life than I ever wanted to.”

“You do?” I asked in confusion.

“Um, well yeah... that day you came home with marks all over your neck, I went and confronted him about it.”

“You did? I never knew that.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “And he tried to explain himself, but I did not want the visual.”

I laughed and hugged my knees to my chest, pouting. “I miss him already.”

“Is that why you’re so uptight?” she asked. “You promised to tell me yours.”

“No.” I frowned. “I’m just worried about Brayden. I don’t know what he’s doing or who he’s hanging out with... but I just have this horrible feeling in my stomach.”

“So why don’t you call him,” Nicole suggested.

“I haven’t talked to him since I told him Norma was in rehab,” I admitted. “I don’t know what I would say.”

“Just ask him, Brighton,” she encouraged. “I’ll sit here with you while you do it.”

“You would?”

“Of course, I would,” she insisted. “That’s what friends are for.”

I reached for my phone and hovered over Brayden’s contact. What if I couldn’t handle his answers? I wasn’t entirely certain I wanted to do this. But I needed to know the truth, and Nicole was right. There was only one way to find out. So with a deep breath, I pressed send, and waited patiently while the line connected.

“Hello?” Brayden answered.

“Brayden,” I sputtered.

“Brighton.” His tone was flat and cold.

I fidgeted while I tried to figure out what to say. It had never been this difficult to talk to him before. So why was it now?

“How have you been?” I asked.

“Are you fucking kidding me with this shit?” he belted out a hollow laugh. “You send your fucking watchdog here to threaten me, and now you

want to ask how I've been? I can't believe you married that prick."

I swallowed and squeezed the phone in my trembling hand. "You've seen Ryland?"

"What the fuck do you think?" he snarled. "Why else would he be in Chicago?"

I almost hung up. I didn't want to hear this. But I kept telling myself that Ryland wouldn't do this to me again. That he wouldn't hurt me like this.

"What did he say?"

"He's trying to tell me who I can and cannot associate with," Brayden grated. "As if I believe one fuckin' word that comes out of his mouth."

"Who have you been spending time with?" I demanded. "Why are you in Chicago?"

"Why don't you ask your husband," he suggested. "He seems to know all about it."

"I'm asking you." My voice wobbled. "My brother. Because I don't want to see you screw up your life Brayden."

"My life was fucked from the day Frankie walked into it," he said. "And that's all you need to know, Brighton. You have your perfect little life in San Francisco. Congratulations on the baby by the way, I hope it doesn't try to kill you in your sleep."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I snarled. "You're my brother, Brayden! How can you talk to me that way?"

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the line, and I knew he regretted what he'd said. But it didn't change the fact that he'd said it.

"Look, Brighton," his voice softened. "I don't want to fight with you. You're my sister and I'm always going to love you, no matter what. But we're living two different lives now and you need to stop worrying about me. I'm a big boy, I can take care of myself."

"So that's it?" I whispered. "We're just not going to see each other or spend time together anymore?"

"And how would that work exactly?" he asked. "I come down to California and spend Christmas with you and Ryland? Or you and Ryland come here and stay in my shitty apartment for a couple of days throughout the year? We can sit around the table, break bread, talk about the stock

market. You tell me if that's how you see it, Brighton. Because you and I both know that will never fucking happen."

"He invited you to the wedding," I said. "You didn't come."

Silence. Again.

There were a couple of other voices in the background I didn't recognize. They were talking to Brayden.

"Listen, I gotta go, Brighton. I'll try to call you later, okay?"

He was brushing me off. Something I'd never thought Brayden would ever do. "Okay," I agreed. "Talk to you later then."

I hung up the phone and cried.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Brighton

Ryland had been back for three days and still hadn't said a word about seeing Brayden. I doubted I'd get the truth if I confronted him, so I was making other plans. Plans that I hated. More sneaking around. More lying.

I checked his schedule for the week and decided today was going to be my best opportunity. I'd already made a copy of his keys, and now it was time to put my plan into action.

I slipped into the silk stockings I'd bought along with the black thong and lace bra. Ryland liked me in white, but I thought black was more fitting to my mission. Once those things were in place, I slipped into a pair of black pumps and a trench coat.

Cliché? Yes. But I didn't care. I needed to distract Ryland with sex, and this was a surefire way to do it. I got to his office just after noon, and he glanced up in surprise when he saw me walk through the door.

"Hey, baby girl. Everything alright?"

"Yep." I smiled and shut the door behind me.

Ryland caught on pretty quickly to what I was doing, and he looked both eager and anxious.

"I have a meeting in twenty minutes."

"Oh do you?" I feigned ignorance as I untied my coat and let it pool on the floor. "Then I guess I'll have to make it quick."

I walked towards him and his eyes devoured me. His grip on the handles of his chair tightened, but he didn't make a move. He wanted to see how I was going to play this out.

"I recall a few other times we had to cut it short for a meeting," I said as I lowered to my knees in front of him. "I do believe you used your belt on me then."

He cursed and his head fell back as I rubbed my palm over his cloth covered erection. Just as I suspected, he was hard as a rock already. I tugged

on his zipper and freed him, stroking him in my hand.

“Do you remember that?” I asked.

“Hell yeah,” he grunted. “Your ass was so pink it was all I could think about during my meeting. I sat through the whole thing with a hard-on.”

I grinned because I never knew that. I needed to interrogate him like this more often.

“What else did you think about?”

He didn’t hesitate to answer, his cock jumping in my hand as I palmed the silky flesh. “How I wrapped my hand around your throat and fucked you from behind. Fuck that was hot, baby girl. I still think about that all the time.”

“Me too,” I whispered.

“Come up here,” he pleaded. “Turn around and sit on my cock. I need to be inside of you.”

I rose up and spun around, and Ryland gripped my hips and helped me lower myself onto him. I leaned forward just a little bit so he could grab my ass the way he liked as he pumped into me from below.

“This is exactly what I needed today, Brighton,” he spoke reverently. “You always know what I need.”

Those words made my heart ache. The guilt of my deception was almost too much, but it had to be done.

His movements grew quicker, harder, and I knew he wasn’t going to last much longer. His thumb reached around and found my clit, and I pulled it to my mouth and sucked it inside instead.

“Not today,” I murmured. “This is just for you.”

He exploded inside of me with a grunt, stroking his hand up and down my back as he collapsed against me. When he’d caught his breath, he turned me in his lap and kissed me soft and slow.

“I love you,” he murmured.

“So fucking much,” I replied.

He gave me a lazy smile and dragged the pad of his thumb across my lips. “Did you miss me?”

I pressed my cheek against his chest and squeezed him with my arms. Of course I missed him. I always missed him. But that wasn’t why I was there. Why did I feel so bad for doing this?

“Yes,” I whispered. “Always.”

“Then you’ll be glad to know I’m working on a solution to that problem,” he said.

“You are?”

“Yes. I’m redefining job responsibilities and management roles around here so I can spend some time away from the office.”

I stared up at him in surprise. “You mean you’re actually going to give up some control?”

He laughed and kissed my temple. “A little,” he admitted. “But it’s worth it if I get to spend more time with you and the baby.”

“I’m all for that plan.” I wiggled my brows.

“I thought you might be,” he said. “And I’ve made us an appointment to look at some houses on Saturday too.”

“Houses?” I asked. “You mean no more sterile apartments?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“You know I didn’t actually think that apartment was sterile,” I admitted.

“I know.” He laughed. “But even if you didn’t, you were right. We’re a family, that means we need a house.”

His words set my heart aflutter. I’d never lived in a house before. He really did want to be a real family and the idea of it was so sweet it almost overshadowed my need for information. Almost.

“Sorry to cut this short,” he said. “But I have to go.”

“It’s okay.” I stood up and gave him a weak smile. “Mind if I use your bathroom before I go. I’m sure I’m a mess.”

“What’s mine is yours, baby girl.” He kissed me on the forehead and swatted my ass. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I waited until he was gone and then locked the door behind him. But when I sat down at his desk and pulled out my key, I wasn’t sure I could go through with it.

I had the same feeling of dread as when I’d discovered his secrets back on Belvedere Island. But this was different. I knew Ryland thought he was protecting me by keeping this information from me. And I wanted to trust that he was right, but with our history, I just couldn’t.

I took a deep breath and opened up his file cabinet. There were about a million neatly organized folders in there, and none of them had

anything to do with Brayden. So I went through each meticulous drawer one by one until I found what I was looking for. And sure enough, it was there. Right beneath his perfectly organized pens. God, I loved my neat freak.

Please don't hurt me Ryland.

I pulled the file with Brayden's name on it from the drawer. And when I opened it, there were surveillance photos. Of Brayden in Chicago. With a bunch of scary looking guys I didn't know.

I had a sinking feeling in my gut because it wasn't too hard to guess who they were.

There was some information about Frankie and his associates, which I really had no desire to see. But Ryland obviously thought it was important, so I kept reading through it. From these records, it looked like Frankie's boss was a guy named Alfredo Zucco. I'd be lying if I said he didn't scare the shit out of me.

He had cold black, lifeless eyes. And Ryland had been keeping an eye on him too. But I didn't know why. There were more pictures of Maria Gallo, Frankie's wife. And they were recent. I was surprised by how scary she looked too.

I kept imagining someone like Norma, who may have been a little scatterbrained, but was generally harmless. But this woman didn't look harmless at all. Brayden told me Frankie didn't really work for the mob, but some kind of loan shark. I guess in my mind that had equated to not as dangerous, but clearly that wasn't true.

If Frankie's body being found in a dumpster was any indication, these people had no qualms about taking life at the drop of the hat. The Lockhart family was evidence to that as well. They were just collateral damage.

I wondered if Brayden was trying to look into these things. If he was, I didn't know what his motive could be. By the time I'd gone through the stack of information, I was no closer to understanding what any of it meant. Ryland had been keeping tabs on a lot more people than I ever suspected. But he was the only one who knew why.

And at the end of the day, I had no other choice. I was going to have to come clean about not trusting him and ask him what it all meant.

When Ryland got home, I was waiting for him with a special dinner from one of his favorite restaurants. He kicked off his cap-toe Armani dress shoes and loosened up the collar of his navy blue shirt while he watched me with an odd expression.

“You’ve been in a very giving mood today,” he remarked.

I gave him a weak smile. Of course he knew something was up, but I wasn’t going to delve into it right away. I would let him eat first, relax a little before I told him I’d lied to him.

“Come and eat,” I urged him. “Before it gets cold.”

He sat down across from me and dug in. The room was quiet, too quiet. I ate my gnocchi and tried to find something pleasant to say before I dragged up the darkness that seemed to loom over us.

“I’m excited to look at houses on Saturday,” I volunteered.

Ryland polished off the last of his steak and pushed his plate across the table as he leaned back in his chair. “I’m glad to hear it, baby girl. Now come here and give me a cuddle.”

I walked on jelly legs and sat on his lap, curling against his chest. He was so warm and strong beneath me. My solid foundation. I hated that I still didn’t trust him completely, and I felt even worse for lying to him.

“Tell me what’s on your mind.” He rubbed circles over my back. “I know there’s something.”

I clutched at his shirt and started crying. How embarrassing. It was happening more and more the farther along I got in my pregnancy and half the time I didn’t even know why.

“Baby.” He gripped my chin in his fingers and brought my gaze to his. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m a horrible person,” I blurted. “A horrible wife.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“I tricked you today,” I said, tearing my gaze from his. “I came to your office and had sex with you so I could look through your files.”

He stiffened beneath me, and his grip tightened. “Why, Brighton?”

“Because I knew you were hiding something to do with Brayden,” I explained. “I talked to him after you’d seen him in Chicago. And I thought... I didn’t want to believe you’d do that to me again. But I really started to think...”

I couldn’t say the words because it was too devastating to even consider. Ryland sighed and pulled me closer.

“You’d have every right to think that,” he said solemnly. “But I need you to know that’s never going to happen, Brighton. I need you to trust me.”

“I know.” I nuzzled against his neck. “But why didn’t you tell me you were keeping tabs on him?”

“Because I didn’t want you to worry,” he said. “I didn’t want you to have any more unnecessary stress.”

“Well that isn’t your call to make,” I protested. “Not when it comes to my family, Ryland. I need to know what’s going on. Even if I might not like it.”

“C’mon.” He lifted me up and carried me to the couch, setting me down so that my head was in his lap. “I’ll tell you what you want to know, but you have to promise not to get upset. It isn’t good for the baby and I need you to trust that I’ve got the situation under control.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

Ryland stroked his fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp as he spoke. He was staring at the wall, and I could see a hint of that old familiar hatred in his eyes when he started to explain.

“There are things I haven’t told you,” he said. “Things I didn’t ever want to tell you. But you’re my wife, and I don’t want secrets between us.”

“Me either,” I agreed. “I want to know everything about you, Ryland. The good and the bad. Whatever it is, it’s in the past.”

He paused to let his eyes wander over my face, and I knew in that moment he still saw me as his pure and unsullied salvation. He didn’t want to taint that, and yet he continued anyway.

“I wanted to kill Frankie,” he deadpanned. “But by the time I left the hospital and figured out who killed my family, Alfredo had already taken care of him. He wasn’t at all pleased with the gigantic mess Frankie had made of that situation.”

“I imagine not.” I closed my eyes and breathed through the pain in my chest. As much as I hated Brayden’s decisions, I was grateful for them. Because if he hadn’t been with Frankie that night, Ryland wouldn’t be with me today. It was a catch twenty-two.

“It was all I thought of while I recovered,” Ryland continued. “So you can imagine my disappointment when it was taken from me before I even had a chance. Frankie deserved to die, but it should have been me to do it.”

I wasn't going to argue with him because that was still his grief talking. It was clear as day in his voice, and I wondered if it would ever lessen over time. Frankie did deserve what he got, but Ryland wasn't a murderer, as much as he told himself he could be. He was nothing like Frankie.

"A few more months passed, and I felt... lost. I was twenty-four years old, and I had everything. And then one day it was just fucking gone. My dad was still around, but his guilt ate him alive. I couldn't look him in the eye anymore-I'd lost all respect for him. He was cowering in fear, trying to keep them from getting to me. He was so afraid they would, so I told him to let them come. It made no difference to me."

More tears squeezed from my eyes, and I buried my face in Ryland's thigh. I didn't want him to see how much it hurt to hear this. How much my heart ached for him.

"The next week, he was gone too. He'd sold the house in Chicago and everything else he could to pay them off and leave me an inheritance. And then he ate the barrel of a gun as penance."

"I'm so sorry, Ryland."

"I didn't feel anything when he died," he said. "I placed sole responsibility for what happened on his shoulders, and he knew it. Perhaps I should have regretted that, but I didn't. Still don't, in fact. He was weak. A coward. And I refused to be like him. I refused to forget what happened to my family and who was at fault. That night played through my mind on repeat, Brighton. And there was only one face that I could see. One place for that rage to go."

He didn't have to tell me. I already knew it was Brayden. My family. We were guilty by association, just like his family had been. A cruel sort of justice to fit the crime. But there was someone else too. A man at the top of the food chain that I hadn't given much thought to before. Now that Ryland was talking about it, I had to wonder how he fit into this puzzle.

"What about Frankie's boss?" I asked. "What about Alfredo?"

"I was well aware that Alfredo gave the order," he said. "But he was untouchable for someone like me. I was nothing back then, and to him, I was a loose end. Men like Alfredo-they don't like loose ends. So he was amused as hell when I walked right into his den. It was a big risk. He could have killed me without a second thought, and we both knew it. Instead, I made him a proposition that day."

“What kind of proposition?” I asked nervously.

“He wanted you and Brayden dead,” he replied in a rough voice. “I asked him to hold off in exchange for some heavy compensation. For seven years-enough time to do what was necessary. To get the resources I needed and to make my plan work.”

His words felt like a lead weight on my chest, and Ryland pulled me up into his arms and stared into my eyes. “I didn’t know you back then,” he said. “I’d never even met you when I made that agreement. I wasn’t thinking straight, Brighton.”

“So he’s going to come after me and Brayden,” I swallowed. “It’s true then.”

“I’m working it out with him.” He clasped my face in his hands and pleaded for me to believe him. “I will never let anything harm you, baby girl.”

“But what about Brayden?” I swallowed. “He’s there. He’s right in the middle of it. Does he know?”

Ryland looked away, his jaw clenching. “I tried to tell him. He doesn’t want to fucking listen. He thinks he can talk Alfredo out of it. That he can go to work with him.”

“What the hell is wrong with him?” I asked.

Ryland didn’t answer, and I was grateful. I knew he hated Brayden, and this was only going to make it worse. But I believed him when he said he was trying to do the right thing.

“I don’t understand how he came to be this way,” I said. “He isn’t the brother that I knew. He isn’t the one I grew up with. I don’t know why he’s trying to follow in Frankie’s footsteps.”

Ryland stroked my back and smoothed my hair away from my face, searching my eyes before he spoke again. “I’m going to protect you, Brighton. No matter what. But there isn’t anything else I can do for Brayden. Not when he’s willingly walking right into the middle of it.”

His words cut me, but it wasn’t his fault. He was right. The same thing I’d learned with Norma. You could only help those who wanted to help themselves.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ryland

Brighton was curiously quiet as she moped around our bedroom getting ready. This was supposed to be a good day for her. A day when I took her to see the crème de la crème of the bay's real estate market and told her to take her pick. Anything you want baby, it's yours. Whatever enthusiasm I'd predicted was swiftly eclipsed by worry.

It was that fucknut Brayden and his dense as shit brain.

He'd gotten to Alfredo, and remarkably, was still breathing-for now. But I didn't trust that slimy tick for one second. I had an inclination to throw some more money at the problem. Knowing how Alfredo's brain worked, he'd take that as an insult. We had a deal, he'd say. The same offhand utterance he probably told my father right before our entire family was slaughtered.

Something needed to be done.

There was still, unofficially, another year on the clock. A year for me to figure out the best angle in which to approach this matter. The most important move I'd ever make. I needed to be methodical and precise in my planning and execution.

While common sense dictated I should take my time and be reasonable, I had a pressing need to quash the threat now. Being hasty could wind up getting us all killed. While Alfredo wasn't actually connected, he was dangerous enough. He had a small army of loyal henchmen and rarely ventured anywhere with no less than six of them.

There was a time when I'd considered taking him on myself. That was until I saw his operation. I wouldn't make it past the first wave of his crew, realistically. So I'd done what any man in my position would do. I compiled.

Years, I'd had eyes on him. Waiting for him to slip up. To nail him with something that'd actually cut the mustard in the half-baked justice system. But Alfredo was a shrewd one. I had a lot of shit on his men, but nothing on the golden goose himself.

It was irritating as fuck.

Sand slipped through the hourglass, day after day, turning up nothing of significance. It wasn't until the charity gala that I'd started to follow the breadcrumbs in my head. Alex Burton could've said just about anything to ruffle my feathers, but he'd specifically chosen the word loyalty. It rung my alarm, and the threat was clear. He was involved in this somehow. I didn't know what his angle was, but I'd stake my fortune that he was in bed with Alfredo on this deal. His crew lived by the code. The only law in their circle. And in an unfortunate twist of fate, Alfredo was indisputably loyal to Robert Burton, which also encompassed Alex by default.

Robert and Alex were always cooking up some dubious plot in their smarmy brains. A scheme that undoubtedly put Brighton right in their crosshairs. Just like her blood relation to Frankie had put her in Alfredo's and mine.

The grimness of my choices and consequences weighed heavily on my mind. Remorse had a strangle hold on me. But it wouldn't do me a lick of good to roll over and admit defeat just yet. Like me, Alfredo had a weakness. So did Alex, and so did Robert. I would find it, and I would use it against them if I must.

I would do this because I loved her. And love motivated me perhaps even more so than hatred ever had.

"Come here, baby." I pulled Brighton into me and kissed her bare shoulder.

She tasted like sunshine, and I couldn't fucking breathe without her near. She was soft and unblemished and pure as the driven snow. I'd never let anyone darken her life again.

"I'm sorry." She leaned her head back against my chest and sighed. "I'm not trying to be a Debbie Downer."

"Should we reschedule for another day?" I asked. "I want this to be a good memory for you. No bad thoughts hanging over us while we pick out our home."

Her shoulders slumped in relief at my suggestion, and though I was disappointed, the offer was genuine.

“You wouldn’t be mad?” she pressed. “I feel so bad. I just can’t stop thinking about Brayden. He won’t return my calls. He hasn’t talked to Norma either.”

Norma. That was another issue I had yet to deal with. I saw an opportunity to take Brighton’s mind off the situation, and I seized it.

“You know she’s leaving the program in two weeks.”

“I know,” she croaked. “I’m really nervous. She seems like she’s doing so well. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but at the same time I hope it lasts.”

“I think she’ll do fine,” I assured her. “She didn’t have any issues during the three days she was down in Florida.”

“True,” she conceded. “But this is Norma. She’s never been great at follow through.”

“Well, once we get a house, how do you feel about giving her the apartment? Then you can keep an eye on her.”

Brighton spun in my arms and blinked up at me with complete adoration. Her eyes were large and childlike, glassy with unshed tears.

“You would do that for her?”

“I’d do it for you,” I insisted. “And it’s probably best she doesn’t go back to Illinois.”

Her arms came around my waist and squeezed.

“God, I love you.”

My heart stuttered violently to life in my chest-like a car that had been left sitting too long. It always did when she said those words. I still found myself in a state of disbelief that she meant them half the time, but Brighton would never lie. She was too good for that.

Pushing her hair back over her shoulders, I kissed her tenderly, infusing myself with her essence. It always felt like I was stealing something from her whenever I did this, but she gave it so willingly. A tiny mew stole from her lips when she felt my heat against her belly, and she rubbed against me like a greedy little kitten.

“I need you,” she begged.

My resulting groan was buried in the thickness of her hair as I groped around for her tits. Subsequently, I found the softness of her throat with my lips and chased the familiar urge of exerting my dominance. I needed to mark her. Claim her. Prove she was mine in every way.

I walked her backwards until her legs hit the bed and eased her back. Then I just took a minute to let my eyes roam over her. She was so goddamn lovely, spread out like an offering against the black silk of the bed sheets. In a white bra and panties, no less. Her tits were ripe for the picking as they rose and fell in exaggerated breaths. She panted and whimpered, desperately swollen with my baby and a ferocious appetite for my cock.

I wanted to devour her.

Kneeling before her, I worshipped her body like the goddess she was. Mapping out her contours, my hands roved reverently about her breasts, her ribs, her stomach. So many things I wanted to do with her. Some items on the agenda would have to wait. Rough and tumble games I'd stow away for a rainy day. A day when the baby was already here, and I knew my dirty deeds wouldn't cause harm. Perhaps while we worked on baby number two then?

I smothered my face against her panties and inhaled like a junkie. Fucking Christ, her scent. I'd try to put it into words, but they wouldn't do it justice. You'd just have to take my word that it couldn't be beaten. Already damp, the thin cotton material stuck to her skin, and I pressed my fingers against it to soak it further. Always wet for me, my little lotus flower. Ah, the things she did to me.

The animal in me stirred, and my teeth tugged on the elastic waistband. Apparently it wasn't hasty enough for my little fiend. Her hips arched up and her fingers slid through my hair and tugged.

"Please, Ryland."

Two distinct urges warred inside of me. I wanted to spank the shit out of her and put her in her place, but I also wanted to listen to her beg while she grinded on my face. Hm, quandaries, quandaries.

I settled on slipping the panties down her thighs and tossing them to the floor before diving in. Lapping at her arousal with raucous slurping noises, she rewarded me with more. Her pussy soaked my lips and face as I fucked her unabashedly with my tongue. It wasn't a chore with Brighton. It was an insatiable need. A fix all its own to experience her this way. I tried to tell her as much, but my words were muffled by her squeezing her thighs around my head. My little pet was being greedy again.

I nipped at her clit in warning and she gasped. She shot me her best pouty eyes, and I grinned up at her.

“You’ll get it when you get it,” I chastised her. “Or not at all if you keep pushing it.”

She whined, and I went back to work, finger fucking her pussy the way the dirty little hellion liked. I coveted every gasp and mewl she made, committing them all to memory. Her tits bounced when she jerked around the bed, her head shaking violently from side to side on the pillow as she muttered incoherent nonsense. One might in fact wonder if I was performing an exorcism. Heh.

So well I knew her body, her needs. I squeezed the fleshy part of her ass in my hands and tilted her pelvis just so. My fingers hooked inside of her, and she sobbed and lurched forward at the same time.

Her muscles tautened and contracted as she arced up off the bed, gripping the sheets in her fists. It was coming, and it was going to be a tidal wave. I buried my face between her legs and let it wash over me, soaking up everything she had to give. My name echoed off the walls of our bedroom, and I took a primitive satisfaction in the raw intoxication of her voice.

For a long while, I didn’t move, reveling in the sight of her coming down from a violent orgasm as she fought for breath. Her hair tangled around her face, and a sheen of sweat glistened across her brow. I had a notion to lick it off of her, but that would require breaking my reverent stare. It was always a war with me, between the watching and the doing. I was fond of drawing it out. Making it as painstakingly slow as I could.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “You’re going to kill me.”

“Death by orgasm sounds like the way to go.”

My quip was funny for all of two seconds before reality crept back in. I didn’t want to joke about losing her. Ever.

Standing up, I discarded my clothes while Brighton watched with heavy lids. Her eyes roamed over my body while she bit her lip to hide a smile. Those eyes were the loudest thing about her. Volumes of emotions lived inside them, and right now they betrayed her hunger.

“Like what you see, baby girl?” I teased.

“You’re such a cocky bastard,” she giggled.

I shrugged. “I’m your cocky bastard.”

Taking my place on the bed, I relaxed against the headboard, cock standing at attention between my legs.

“Come up here,” I ordered. “I want to watch you ride me.”

“You mean you want to have access to my huge boobs so you can play with them the entire time,” she retorted.

Again, I shrugged. No need to play coy.

Brighton wiggled her way towards me, stretching her legs on opposite sides of my hips before planting her ass in my lap. Her hands used my shoulders as a springboard as she rubbed herself against my cock. A groan escaped in spite of my feigned composure.

“Somebody’s being greedy,” she threw the words back at me as she slid along my length, teasing but not quite letting me inside.

It was of little consequence to me. I leaned back and stretched my hands behind my head to enjoy the show. I could watch this all fucking day.

Brighton threw her head back in laughter, taunting me with the creamy skin along her throat. Lusting for a taste of it, I bobbed forward and captured her around the waist, flicking my tongue against her pulse. That pulse beat for me. Without that pulse, I was nothing.

That knowledge got me harder than anything else ever could. She was all mine to play with. To tease and taunt and fuck how I saw fit. My teeth scraped along her sensitive skin and brought on a welcome hitch in her breath. Brighton liked the anticipation. The ever present knowledge that I’d sink my teeth into her flesh, but never quite knowing where.

Course, I had to be more cautious in the places I went about it these days. Another welcome side effect of her carrying my child. Even the sadist in me had a tender spot for the little fella. We didn’t want to harm him.

At the base of her throat, I gave her just enough of a nip to leave a little mark. That would do quite nicely to distract. She moaned and tugged at my hair in a weak attempt to take back control by shoving my face against her skin. I used the hand resting on her tit to pinch the nipple at the same time I bit down on her shoulder.

“Again,” she ordered.

My palms squeezed her ass and then smacked it for good measure.

“Sorry, my love,” my voice darkened. “Was that a command you just gave me?”

“Please,” she begged recklessly. “Mark me again.”

Hard fingers wrapped around her pony tail and gave a sharp tug. “Do you forget who you’re talking to?”

Her eyes widened as her head rattled back and forth in a frantic effort. “Never,” she promised. “You’re in charge, Ryland.”

I hummed my approval against the column of her neck, imbibing her scent in long, slow pulls. My lips roamed over the silken landscape of her skin, pausing to nip her earlobe before further exploration. She hissed in a breath, and I used the opportunity to latch onto her neck. Sucking her until she bruised, I soothed it over with my tongue while my fingers strummed circles over her back.

“Better?” I asked.

“Yes,” she breathed.

Covering her hand with mine, I dragged it down until it was wrapped around my cock. I liked to watch her play with it, to see the uncertainty bloom across her face as she handled the beast. She made a fist and gave a couple light tugs before teasing my balls with the pads of her fingers. Something else she liked to play with. I wasn’t complaining.

My head fell back, and I urged her forward. Without much decorum, her breast was promptly stuffed into my mouth while she pleased me. I wanted to be inside of her, but prolonging her defiant foreplay seemed like an acceptable alternative.

Throughout the progression of her pregnancy, her nipples had grown sweeter. I wasn’t imagining things, they tasted like frigging candy and I couldn’t get enough of them. Each pink confection received an appropriate amount of tongue lashing before I repeated the process on the other side. Every time I deemed myself satisfied, I went back in for just another sip. That’s how it always begins, isn’t it? Just another taste? I groaned out my frustration while rubbing the soft mounds all over my face.

Brighton giggled and then sobered.

“I want you to fuck me hard,” she whispered.

My eyes roamed over hers, staggered by the fear of rejection that lied within. Before I even got a chance to say anything at all, she continued to state her case.

“I asked the doctor, and she said it’s fine as long as nothing hurts.”

My hands cradled her face, and I gave her a tender kiss. She melted against me in one breath, and in the next attempted to stage a protest. My fingers hardened around her jaw and bit into the skin, eliciting a gasp as my lips moved to her ear.

“You want my filthy words, baby girl?”

“Yes.” She panted.

“Tell me.”

“I want you to say dirty things.”

My tongue clicked, and I shook my head in disappointment. “Too vague. Sorry, baby.”

She wailed in frustration and gave me her widest, most innocent eyes. “Please, Ryland?”

“Please what?” I mocked her, my hands gentle as a Spring breeze as they glided over her skin.

“Please fuck me and make it good.”

I laughed in spite of myself. “You wound me, baby girl. Is it not always good?”

She had the decency to look ashamed of her jumbled up words. “Yes, of course it is. Always. The best...”

“Okay, now you’re just going overboard. No need to gloat.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she tried to pull away. “Just forget it,” she ranted.

I snatched her arm and held in her place with a sadistic grin. Oh how I loved when she took a tone with me.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

She opened her mouth, and I crushed my lips against hers, shocking the hell out of her. My teeth snagged the plump bottom lip and tugged sharply. She whined out her pleasure and dug her fingers into my shoulders.

My erection had the nerve to start grinding against her belly. Impatient little fuck.

“Stand up,” I barked.

She scurried to her feet like a good little soldier and awaited my instructions with clasped hands.

“I’m not going to fuck you hard, Brighton.”

Another protest was on the verge of her lips as she blinked up at me, and I silenced her with a look. She’d learned to love the pain I bestowed her. Now she craved it. She wasn’t the only one who missed it.

“You’ve got my baby inside of you,” I scolded as I pressed her against my chest. “We aren’t going to risk it. But I’ll give you what you need.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I turned her to face the wall and pushed her palms up against it.

“Open your legs for me, dirty girl.”

She did.

The engorged purple head of my cock didn't waste any time seeking out her heat as I rubbed myself against her. Dipping inside of her once just to get wet, I smeared some of that wetness over her ass.

A pause. I waited for the all clear from ground control.

"Yes, please..." she moaned. "Please, Ryland."

"Okay, baby," I cooed. "No need to ask me twice."

I slipped inside of her with a torrent of curse words. Her toes curled into the carpet and her spine arched into a beautiful curve once I'd rooted myself fully.

"Good girl." My praises were punctuated by tender kisses down her back and across her shoulders. "Such a good girl for me."

She quaked beneath my praise and tried to rock back against me. I stilled her with my fingers in her mouth.

"Suck."

She did.

Once they were nice and wet, I brought them down over her clit and coaxed some more incoherent babble from her lips.

"This is mine," I informed her.

"Yes, yes, yes..." she agreed enthusiastically.

"My pussy." Thrust. "My ass." Thrust. "My filthy little mouth to fuck when I please." Thrust.

"Yes, Ryland!"

Her voice tinged with excitement, and my cock swelled with every throaty murmur.

"You'll never take it away from me again."

"No, never." She shook.

My thumb flattened against her clit and she bucked against me, screaming out profanities. What an utterly sweet debauchee she'd turned into.

She rode my palm, pistoning me faster, harder. I allowed her take over the pace because it felt too fucking good not to. She trembled and constricted around me, searing me with scorching heat as savage shock waves tore through her body. Already on the verge of exploding myself, her next words propelled me over the brink.

"I'll never leave you again, Ryland."

"Oh, Christ." I threw my head back on a groan. My cock jerked violently, spewing boiling hot lava deep inside of her.

Brighton collapsed back against my chest, and I barely made it to the bed before we both fell in a heap. Completely unaware of how profoundly she affected me, she curled up like a kitten and promptly went to sleep in my arms.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Brighton

After two weeks of moping around, I finally decided that I needed to stop stressing over Brayden. I'd left him texts and voicemails to call me, and I hoped that he would. But in the meantime, I needed to focus on getting ready for the baby which meant house shopping.

When Ryland made the appointment with the realtor, I had no idea what kind of houses he had in mind for us. But when I saw them, I was utterly speechless.

They were the kind of houses I'd only ever seen in magazines. Top of the line luxury with more space than I even knew what to do with. From turn of the century in Pacific Heights to art deco in Sea Cliff, we saw them all. The realtor had an excited gleam in her eye as she led us from property to property, no doubt tallying up the commission she was about to rake in. But Ryland didn't really seem to have an opinion one way or the other, simply asking me what I thought of each one as we went. Until we got to the last and final house.

On Belvedere Island.

His whole demeanor changed as we drove down Golden Gate Avenue and pulled into the gated driveway of the white mansion overlooking the sea. I threaded my fingers through his and squeezed, giving him a soft smile as the car came to a stop. I never would have guessed that he'd even consider a house so close to his old family home, but there was something in his eyes that told me differently. It was a small spark of hope.

"I'd understand if you didn't want to live here," he said. "But I grew up in this community, and I know the people. I think it's a great place to raise kids, and I wanted you to see this place before you make a decision."

I leaned up and kissed him before the realtor ruined our moment by delving into details about the architecture. Ryland helped me from the car, and I got a good look at the palatial Queen Anne style mansion perched on a prime piece of San Francisco real estate. It was elegant, yet in an understated way, which I liked. It looked like a real home, albeit a very

large one. The realtor started rattling off features as I tried to take it all in. The property came with wraparound porches, a solarium, and a carriage house. As she commenced the tour, she pointed out each feature as we went along.

“Herringbone oak floors, mahogany doors, marble bathrooms...”

I stopped listening as I tried to take it all in. It was honestly the most beautiful home I’d ever seen. Everything inside was filled with natural light, creating a relaxed and happy atmosphere. In the back, the views of the city skyline and Angel Island were unrivaled. There was a pool and garden, and even an outdoor breakfast nook. The property had more bedrooms than Ryland and I could ever use in a lifetime, but he mentioned something about getting a housekeeper upon my pointing that out.

When I glanced up to see how carefully he was watching me, it was obvious how much he wanted this place. This was where he felt most at home. Where he wanted to settle down and make a lifetime of memories. I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think it’s completely crazy.” I smiled up at him. “But I love it.”

He looked relieved. “You do?”

“I’d be crazy not to.”

“Agreed,” the realtor chimed in.

We both laughed and took a moment to stare out at the skyline before Ryland spoke again.

“Let’s do it,” he said. “I want to put in an offer today.”

Once Ryland set things in motion, it took us all of three weeks to get settled into our new house. The realtor told me she appreciated that he was a man who got things done quickly. I simply laughed. She had no idea what Ryland could accomplish when he set his mind to it.

We had a housewarming dinner and invited Matt, Nicole, and Norma. Since leaving rehab, she’d moved into our old apartment, and seemed to be spending a lot of time with Ted. It was very odd, considering he was nothing like Frankie, but I guess that was a good thing.

Matt and Nicole’s relationship had obviously progressed just fine, considering how she couldn’t keep her hands off him. She still found time

to book in shopping dates and arrange times to decorate the nursery which I obliged her. We also planned to continue our weekly meetings for Sophia's Shoes in the city until the baby came.

Everything seemed to be going according to plan, and true to Ryland's word, he'd cut back his hours at work. But as soon as everyone left that night, he dropped a bomb on me.

"I have to go back to Chicago tomorrow," he said.

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms. "No."

"Brighton." He sighed. "It really is just business this time. I swear."

"I don't believe you."

"Come here." He patted his lap.

I frowned and walked towards him slowly, and once I was within reach he tugged me onto his lap. Taking out his phone, he pulled up some emails along with a schedule.

"I have a meeting with Robert Burton," he said. "About the shareholders of my company. It's important, and I can't put it off any longer, otherwise I wouldn't go."

"Robert Burton, as in..."

"Alex's father." Ryland nodded.

"What does he have to do with your shareholders?" I asked, remembering how Matt said the Burton family was involved in some bad business dealings.

Ryland's expression clearly told me he didn't want me involved in this. It only made me more determined.

"It's complicated, Brighton. He's trying to strong arm some of my shareholders. He's using underhanded business tactics, and I won't stand for it."

"But he's dangerous," I protested. "Matt told me some of the things he'd been involved with."

"Don't worry." Ryland gave me a soft kiss on the lips. "I've got it handled, baby girl."

I didn't like that he was dealing with the Burtons one bit. It scared the hell out of me, but this was his company. I knew he wouldn't just let whatever they were doing slide.

"Promise me you'll be careful," I pleaded.

"Always." He gave me a reassuring smile.

"And you're going to take Mick with you."

“No.” He shook his head. “Mick stays with you. That’s his job.”

“I can have Matt and Nicole come stay while you’re gone,” I said. “I’d much rather he was with you.”

“Not gonna’ happen,” he smirked. “You don’t need to worry about me, Brighton. I can take care of myself, okay?”

I frowned but nodded. There was no point in arguing with him when he was like this. He was stubborn as hell.

“And while we’re on the topic.” He reached into his filing cabinet and pulled out a folder. “I need your signature on a few things.”

“Okay.” I glanced at the paperwork in confusion before I realized what it was. If I wasn’t worried before, now I was terrified.

“Life insurance?” I squeaked.

“I just want to have everything in order,” he explained. “It’s just a precaution.”

I shook my head and crossed my arms. “I don’t want to sign these,” I protested. “That makes it seem like it could really happen.”

Ryland reached up and trailed his fingers along my jaw. “Baby girl, this is important,” he said softly. “If anything ever happens to me...”

“Which it won’t,” I cut in.

“It won’t,” he assured me, “but if it did, I need to know that you and the baby will have everything you need, okay? Everything in my will has already been arranged, and this is the last step. Consider it something to help me sleep at night.”

I still didn’t feel comfortable with it, but I decided to indulge him just so I didn’t have to think about it anymore. I scrawled my signature across the documents quickly and then shoved them away.

“One more thing.” He pulled a piece of paper from his desk with a picture of an SUV. He’d been looking at them forever trying to decide on the safest one to buy. “This is the one I want to get. Okay?”

I didn’t want to tell him he was scaring me. It felt like he was wrapping everything up. Like he really thought something might happen to him.

“We’ll get it together,” I said. “When you come back from your trip.”

He nodded.

“Promise me,” I demanded. “Promise me that this is all just a precaution like you say, Ryland.”

“Come on, baby.” He pulled me up and wrapped his arms around me. “Let’s go to bed. Before I have to leave tomorrow.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Brighton

There was a churning feeling in my gut that I hadn't been able to rid all morning. Ryland had been gone for six hours and I hadn't heard from him. Not even a text.

It wasn't like him.

There was something about this business trip that had me biting my nails, and it wasn't just Robert and Alex Burton. I didn't have a good feeling about any of this, and I wasn't sure what to do about it.

I paced anxiously across the back porch, cell phone clutched in my hand as I waited for Ryland to respond to one of my many worried texts. He didn't leave me hanging like this. Ever. I knew something was wrong.

My cell phone rang, and my heart swelled with relief. But then I saw that it was Nicole.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Brighton, have you seen the news?"

My hand trembled as I walked into the house and looked for the remote. "What news?"

"Turn on Channel 7," she said.

I flipped through the channels and saw a photo of Ryland and Alex Burton plastered across the screen, along with a scrolling headline beneath.

Alex Burton and Ryland Bennett strike business partnership

What does this mean for the future of technology?

Rivals unite as one...

"No," I whispered. "That isn't right. Ryland would never make a deal with him."

"That's the same thing I thought," Nicole murmured. "Something weird is going on."

"I haven't heard from him since he left this morning," I croaked. "I'm really scared, Nicole."

"I'm sure he's just in flight, Brighton," Nicole tried to reassure me. "He probably wanted to get back home to you as soon as possible."

I accepted her words because I needed to believe them. But in my gut, I knew it wasn't true. Ryland always texted me before his flight.

"Hey, look," Nicole said. "Why don't I grab some cupcakes and come over so we can work on the nursery until he gets home?"

"Okay," I agreed.

I didn't want to admit how much I needed her there. My nerves were completely shot, and I was grateful for the distraction.

"I'll be there in an hour," she said. "Just sit down and relax until I get there."

Five o' clock came and went. Then six, and seven, and nine. It was now eleven at night, and there was still no word from Ryland. Nicole and I had worked on the nursery and gorged on cupcakes and takeout. But I couldn't hold back my fears any longer.

"I have to call the police," I said. "There's something wrong, Nicole. I can feel it."

She bit her lip and nodded. "I think you're right, Brighton. Maybe they can track his phone or something."

The police arrived an hour later. The officer that showed up didn't seem all that invested in Ryland's whereabouts and even went as far to suggest he was probably just drunk in a bar somewhere.

I told him that wasn't Ryland. That he never did anything like this. I told him about his meeting with Robert Burton and Alex's threat from the charity gala months before. The officer jotted everything down in his notepad and explained the procedures. It hadn't been long enough to officially declare him missing, but given who he was and the previous threat, they were going to look into it.

And then they just left me there. Alone and without my husband.

Three days had come and gone.

I was going out of my fucking mind. I couldn't stop crying, and I couldn't keep anything down. Matt, Nicole, Norma, and Ted all kept silent vigil in the living room, waiting for any shred of news.

Ryland had officially been declared missing. The police hadn't told me anything, but they'd come and torn the house apart searching for clues. I'd been questioned a thousand times, things I didn't even know. And I hated myself for not knowing more about Ryland's company. Why didn't I know these things? I should have known these things. I was supposed to be helping him, and I couldn't even answer their questions.

I'd sent Mick to look for him, and he didn't protest. He said Ryland could be pissed whenever he came back, but right now, he was his top priority. I was grateful and spent every waking second thinking of something else I could do. Something else that I'd missed.

I even tried to contact Alex Burton. I left him several hate filled messages, but he wouldn't return my calls. All of the light that filled my life was suddenly turning bleak. My heart grew weak in my chest, and I felt like I wouldn't be able to go on. I couldn't lose him. There was just no way. We were meant to be together. It couldn't end this way.

There was a knock at the door, and Norma got up to answer it while Nicole tried to get me to drink some water. Another detective came into the room, one I didn't recognize.

"Brighton Bennett?" he asked.

"That's me." I stood up on shaky legs. "Do you have any news?"

"I'm going to need you to come with me," he said.

Matt was at my side a moment later, glaring at the man and his tone of voice. "What's this about?" he demanded.

"We have some questions for Mrs. Bennett," the detective answered.

"You've already asked her questions," Matt said. "Repeatedly. She doesn't need to go anywhere. This is her home, and as you can see, she's very pregnant."

The detective didn't seem to care. "She doesn't have a choice at this point."

"It's okay, Matt," I said. "I want to help. I'll do whatever they ask."

"I'm coming with you," he stated.

Nicole gave me a quick hug and smoothed down my hair. "I'll stay by the phone in case anyone calls," she said. "I'll let you know if I hear anything at all, okay?"

"Okay."

I followed the detective out the door and into his car, grateful to have Matt by my side. Whatever was going on, I had a feeling it didn't bode

well for me.

“I told you he was in Chicago,” I said for the fifth time.

“That is what you said,” the detective agreed, leaning across the table to watch me carefully. “But that wasn’t true, Mrs. Bennett.”

“What are you talking about?” I hissed. “He had a business trip to Chicago that day. With Robert Burton. How many fucking times do I have to say it?”

I was losing my patience, but I didn’t care. They were wasting their time asking me these stupid questions over and over instead of looking for Ryland. I was beginning to hate them all.

“Ryland scheduled a flight that morning, but he never took it,” the detective answered in a neutral tone. “His driver dropped him off in front of his building, and that was the last time he was seen.”

Bile rose up in my throat as I clutched my arms around myself, shaking my head. “No, that’s not right,” I rasped. “You have to be mistaken. He went straight from our house. And then all that stuff was on the news, so I know he met with Alex Burton.”

“That meeting with Alex Burton took place two weeks ago,” the detective answered again.

I wanted to believe that he was lying to me. That he just misunderstood what was happening. But I could tell by his eyes he wasn’t. Which only meant one thing. Ryland had been backed into a corner by Alex Burton. But how? And why didn’t he say anything to me?

“I understand that you also signed off on a sizable life insurance policy on your husband the night before he went missing.”

I stared at him in shock as his words sunk in.

“Oh my God.” Disgust rolled through me. “You think I... you seriously think...”

I couldn’t even get the words out. They were too vile. Too horrible.

“I would never...” I shook my head adamantly, the tears flowing freely. “I love him so much. I just want him back. He’s everything to me. Please...” I sobbed. “You just have to get him back for me.”

The detective watched me have a complete mental breakdown as if it was some sort of a test before he nodded in conclusion.

“I know this is very upsetting, Mrs. Bennett,” he said in a gentle tone. “But you have to understand how it looks. You’re telling us he was threatened by Alex Burton, and yet he willingly entered into a business partnership with him two weeks ago. And then you just so happen to sign off on a life insurance policy the night before he goes missing. You have to understand how that looks.”

“How it looks is that Alex is setting this up,” I yelled. “And while you’re in here accusing me of things I would never do, my husband could be in danger...”

We didn’t get any further, because the next moment, there was a knock on the door of the room I was being held in.

“Mrs. Bennett.” A sharply dressed woman with shrewd eyes stepped into the room. “I don’t want you to say another word.”

“Who are you?” I asked as the detective gave a frustrated sigh.

“My name is Edith Rickard, and I’m your newly appointed attorney.”

I blinked in confusion. “Do I need an attorney?”

The detective folded his hands across the table and shrugged. “That’s up to you, Mrs. Bennett. But in the interest of helping your husband...”

“Don’t you play that card,” Edith barked. “You’ve been badgering my client. Correction...” Her eyes trailed over my body. “My very pregnant and obviously distraught client for two hours straight when she is clearly the victim in this case. Now, do you have anything to charge her with?”

“No,” the detective replied flatly.

“Very well, then come with me, Mrs. Bennett. We’re done here.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Brighton

I smoothed my fingers over the necklace Ryland bought me for our wedding, remembering his words.

Keep it close to your heart, and we'll always be in sync.

I had to hold back a sob as I wondered if his heart still beat. I couldn't feel it. I couldn't feel him. Where was he?

Edith had been working nonstop, pouring over everything on Ryland's computer, looking for clues as to what could have happened. She told me she suspected that Alex Burton was blackmailing him somehow. That it didn't make any sense for Ryland to partner with him when his company was doing so well otherwise. But we needed proof, and that was going to take time.

I left it in her hands and did what little I could. It wasn't much. It wasn't enough. But it was all I could do to focus on each task as though they were the most important thing in the world. As though they would each bring me one step closer to having Ryland home.

The house was still filled with people, but I'd never felt more alone.

Mick texted me updates, but so far there hadn't been anything of use. He'd gone to Chicago, but now that I knew Ryland never made it to Chicago, it seemed pointless for him to be there. I told him to come back this morning, and we would figure out where to go from here.

Then my phone chimed, and my chest tightened when I saw the name.

Brayden.

He'd been ignoring me for weeks, and it was odd for him to be contacting me now. I glanced around the room and realized I didn't want to read this in a room full of people, so I stepped out onto the back porch while they planned out more search efforts.

I swiped the screen and scrolled to my messages.

*I need you to meet me.
It's about Ryland.*

My heart skipped as I pressed send on Brayden's name. But it just rang out. I tried him twice more before I gave up and started tapping out a text. Before I could even send it, another one came through. With an address and a time, and nothing more.

I stared at the phone in confusion. This meant Brayden was in San Francisco, but why? The horrifying realization that he might have had something to do with Ryland's disappearance haunted me. I tried to call him again, but he didn't answer.

Another text came through a moment later.

*Don't bring anyone with you or tell them where you're going.
He's in danger.*

Frustration and relief both warred inside of me. If he was in danger, it meant that he was still alive. That there was still time. But I didn't understand why Brayden would be helping him if that's even what this was. Or why he wasn't answering his phone.

I glanced over my shoulder and looked through the window at all of our friends gathered around the sofa, working hard to try to find Ryland. It was stupid for me to go alone to this address. I texted Brayden back.

I can't come alone.

A reply came through almost immediately.

You have to. Or else he's dead.

Just trust me.

Panic engulfed me. I didn't want to believe those words. And could I even trust Brayden at this point? I had no idea. But this was my only ray of hope. Every other lead we had was dead. And I couldn't just ignore it.

The time on my phone told me I had an hour to get to the address on my screen. It wasn't a lot of time, considering I was on Belvedere Island, but I would have to make it work. The only problem was sneaking out of the house without anyone noticing. There was no way they would let me go anywhere with the shape I'd been in over the last few days.

I walked back in and gave Nicole a smile when she looked up at me with a worried expression.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." My voice was shaky, and totally unconvincing. "I'm just going to go upstairs and lie down for a nap."

Nicole stood up to help me. She was like a mother hen, hovering over me and trying to do everything for me. It was incredibly sweet, but right now, I needed her attention elsewhere.

"I'm fine, Nicole," I told her. "I can manage on my own. It makes me feel better knowing that you're all down here looking through everything."

She nodded and bit her lip in clear frustration. We hadn't found anything in Ryland's records, which didn't really surprise me. He had a lot of files on a variety of different people, including Alex Burton, but none of them gave away the really shady details. He always seemed to keep those to himself somehow.

"Well, just let me know if you need anything," Nicole said. "I'll be right down here."

"Thanks." I nodded and scurried from the room as quickly as I could go. I was seven months pregnant, and everything about me was slowing down.

I walked up the stairs so I didn't arouse any suspicion and went straight to Ryland's office. The keys to his jaguar were in his key box, complete with a label and all. It fractured what little was left of my strength. Only my husband would put a label on keys to a Jaguar.

I hoped that I could help him. I hoped that Brayden wasn't deceiving me.

I walked out onto the balcony and took the stairs that led down to the back yard. Luckily the garage was far enough away from the sitting room that I didn't think they would hear me.

I felt ridiculous slipping into his Jaguar. Ryland didn't like me driving anywhere, so I didn't. I was fine with that. I felt safe riding with Ted, and I'd grown used to it.

The interior smelled of leather and cinnamon, and I closed my eyes to inhale. I needed him to be safe. I needed him to be okay. I didn't know what I would do if he wasn't.

The car started with a quiet purr, and I slipped out of the gate without anyone noticing, at least as far as I could tell. The drive was long and tense. Every mile that passed felt like ten. Traffic was thick in the city this time of day and it took me forever to get to the address.

I frowned when I realized it was a warehouse. There wasn't much around us, and I'd be highly surprised if the Jag was even still sitting on the street when I came back out. But none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was that my husband might be in there. Or at least, Brayden might know where he was.

Still, I hesitated. I didn't have a good feeling about this.

What the hell was Brayden doing in a warehouse in this part of the city? Everything about this screamed trouble. I tried to think of what was logical. What was best for me to do. I could call the detective and tell him I was here. But what if Brayden was right? What if someone was holding Ryland and they hurt him when they saw I'd called the cops?

I didn't know what else to do. So I sent Brayden another text.

I'm here. Is it safe to come in?

My phone chimed almost immediately with an affirmative answer. It didn't reassure me in the slightest. I wasn't a complete idiot though. I knew there was no way I could go in there without some kind of backup plan, just in case.

So I texted Mick. He was due to land right about this time if I remembered correctly. I didn't know what to tell him, so I forwarded Brayden's texts to him and told him I was going to check it out. And then I decided to leave my phone in the car and turned on so he could track it if he needed to.

I stepped out of the car with clenched hands. It was broad daylight, and still the thought of going into this warehouse scared the crap out of me. I wanted to demand that Brayden come out. I decided that I wouldn't actually go inside until I saw his face. So I started for the front doors.

They wouldn't open, and there was no response to my knock.

I sighed in frustration as I walked around the building, looking for another way in. I found another door, just as a chilling voice spoke from behind me.

"Hello, Brighton."

I spun around to be met with cold, black eyes. Eyes that were familiar, and it took me a moment to realize why. They were from the photographs in Brayden's file. Alfredo Zucco.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

He smiled, revealing a gold tooth.

"We haven't met yet, you and I," the man answered. "But I'm sure you might have heard of me. My name is Alfredo."

I felt like I was going to throw up. I wanted to run, but somehow I knew I wouldn't get very far. So I tried to stall while I came up with another plan.

"I know who you are," I said coolly. "Where is Brayden?"

"You've created a bit of a media spectacle here," he said with an amused laugh. "So it's been a little difficult to get in touch with you until now. Brayden's just inside."

"I want to see him," I demanded. "Tell him to come out here."

Alfredo took a menacing step forward and grabbed me by the arm with a painful grip. "You're just like your father," he sneered. "Don't know your fucking place. But you will before the day is through you Irish cunt."

He raised his hand and backhanded me, completely shocking the hell out of me. I didn't have time to fight before he started dragging me towards the door. I tried to scream, but he put his greasy hand over my mouth and grabbed me by the hair.

I clawed at his face with my free hand and raised my knee, aiming for his groin. I missed and his eyes flared with hatred so fierce I couldn't help but cower.

"I will punch you right in your fat fucking stomach," he threatened. "Just try me, bitch."

I shook my head and pleaded from behind his hand, dragging in what little air he allowed me. I realized that it was already too late. I'd fucked up coming here, and now I needed to be smart. Or he was going to hurt my baby.

The door opened, and he shoved me inside where I met the eyes of another man I recognized. The same one that had been on the street the day Nicole and I went shopping. I'd thought Ryland had sent him, but I was obviously dead wrong. They each grabbed one of my arms and walked me through the dark warehouse, leading me to a stairwell.

As we descended into the bowels of the brick building, I feared that this was it for me. That I was going to die here. But I still held out hope that Brayden was nearby, and that he would put a stop to all of this. It was a ridiculous notion, but it was the only one I had.

Once we were on solid ground, the men walked me down another long corridor, and I shivered when I saw some of the rusty old equipment lying around. It looked like it was an old meat packing plant, and I was officially scared out of my mind.

They opened another metal door where there was a third man standing guard. I spotted Brayden across the room right away, sitting in a chair. His eyes widened in fear the moment he saw me, but it was the voice below me that had my heart leaping out of my chest.

"Baby girl. God, no. Please..."

I looked down to see Ryland sitting on the cement below me, his eye swollen shut and his face badly beaten. I shook the men's hands off my body and immediately lowered myself beside him, clasping his face in my hands.

"You're okay," I breathed. "Oh my God, you're okay."

I was filled with relief, and so fucking happy. But Ryland wasn't. For the first time since I'd known him, there was real fear in his eyes. He pushed me behind him and shielded me with his body as he glanced up at Alfredo.

"What the fuck else do you want?" he pleaded.

“That depends.” Alfredo smiled. “How much is the little Irish bitch worth to you?”

“Everything,” he said without hesitation. “I’ve already told you. The rest of the shares? I don’t care. Name it, and it’s yours.”

Alfredo released a hearty laugh and pointed a finger at Ryland in amusement. “You see, Jacob. That’s why I like you. That loyalty. You would have made a great addition to my crew.”

Ryland didn’t look at all flattered by the compliment, and he tightened his grip on my hand as I clung to his body.

“But the thing is,” Alfredo continued. “I’m already loyal to someone else. I’m sure you can understand.” He shrugged. “It’s a long-term business arrangement. Can’t really back out on it now.”

“Whatever Robert’s offered you, it can’t be more than what I’ll give you,” Ryland said. “Anything you want.”

Alfredo looked insulted as he muttered something in Italian. “That wasn’t the deal we made six years ago, *amico*.”

The conversation I had with Ryland drifted back to my mind. He told me he’d paid Alfredo to spare our lives for seven years. The clock had slowly been ticking away, and we were supposed to have another year.

I glanced at Brayden across the room and snarled.

“How did you get mixed up in this?” I demanded. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Ryland squeezed my hand in warning, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t take my eyes off Brayden. Off the cause of all of this. It was his fault we were in this room. His fault that all of this was happening. I didn’t care if it was logical, I hated him for it.

“I’m so sorry, Brighton,” he whispered. “I thought... I thought I could change things. I didn’t know...”

“It’s just business,” Alfredo remarked flippantly. “I’m a man of my word. You two were dead that night Frankie fucked up. You should just be thankful for the six extra years this one bought you.”

I closed my eyes and pressed my face against Ryland’s back. I didn’t want to accept that this was it. But his words sounded so final.

Neither Ryland or Brayden was bound, and I wondered why. But when I glanced up at Alfredo and his companions again, I saw the guns strapped to their hips. There was no way out of here. Frankie had carved this path for us and it couldn’t be changed. I pressed a hand to my belly as a

sob escaped from me. And then I thought about Mick and hope bloomed inside of me like a ray of sunshine. I'd only been here ten minutes, so maybe if I could figure out a way to stall, then we'd have a chance.

"Where are your keys and phone?" Alfredo asked.

It took me a minute and Ryland squeezing my hand to realize he was talking to me.

I dug the keys out of my pocket and held them out while clinging to Ryland's body. "The phone's in the car."

He turned to one of his men and gave him instructions in Italian. When he walked out the door Alfredo and his friend stepped forward.

"Alright." Alfredo pulled his gun from the holster and waved it around casually. "Enough of the chit chat. How do you want to do this? You can all go together... real quick, bang bang bang... or one by one. Your choice."

Oh, God. I was going to be sick.

"Please," I sobbed. "Please don't..."

Ryland stood and pulled me up with him. And then he gave Brayden some kind of silent signal before he pulled me into his arms, stroking my face in his palms.

"When Brayden tells you to run," he whispered in my ear. "You fucking run, Brighton. I mean it. Don't look back."

I shook my head and clung to his body in disbelief. He made it sound like he didn't plan on leaving with me. I had no idea what was happening, what they had planned, but I wasn't leaving without either of them.

"I love you, baby girl." His voice was hoarse, and there was finality in his words. "So fucking much."

It took me a moment to realize what he was doing. He was shielding my body with his. I clung to his shirt and shook my head frantically. "No! It doesn't end like this. It can't end like this."

I tried to look across the room, to see what Brayden was doing, but Ryland pulled my gaze back to him. "Just look at me," he whispered. "Stay with me, just a moment longer. Never forget how much I love you."

I didn't understand his words. I didn't understand what was happening.

"Now," he barked.

I heard a pop, and then Ryland slumped against me before we both collapsed to the ground. There was something warm and sticky coming from his back, and I knew it was blood. I screamed, and I heard more popping, and then scuffling. Angry grunts and curses filled the room. Alfredo sounded surprised and pissed off, but I couldn't see what was happening.

Brayden said something, but I couldn't hear it. Alfredo started talking in Italian. Blood rushed through my ears as I clutched Ryland, trying desperately to feel his heartbeat. I couldn't move him, he was so heavy against me. His body was protecting me from whatever was happening around us, but I was too hysterical to understand.

I finally managed to get my head out from beneath him, just enough to see Alfredo's companion lying dead in a pool of blood on the floor. Alfredo was wrestling with Brayden, and he was bleeding all over the place.

"Brighton, run!" Brayden yelled. "Run now and don't look back."

I was frozen in horror. I couldn't have run if I wanted to. But then Alfredo reached for his gun, pressing it directly to Brayden's head. I screamed and pleaded, but he didn't listen. Brayden's eyes found mine from across the room, and he whispered something so softly, I could barely make it out.

"I'm so sorry. I was supposed to get you out of here. I failed. I'm so sorry, Brighton."

And that was when I saw it. The gun laying on the floor next to the other man's body. I didn't know how to handle a gun-I'd never handled one in my life. But I lunged for it and pointed it at Alfredo, desperately hoping it would go off when I pulled the trigger.

The door burst open behind me, and I was so certain it was the third man coming to finish us off. I didn't look. I just closed my eyes and squeezed the trigger. And I kept squeezing until every bullet had emptied from the chamber and there was nothing but the sound of empty clicking.

"Brighton."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and a voice that was calm and familiar. Everything was blurry when I opened my eyes, but it was Mick's face that I saw.

"Shhh..." He gently pulled the gun from my hands. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay."

I looked across the room and saw Brayden struggling to sit up as he kicked Alfredo's body away. And then my gaze swung to Ryland. I squeezed my eyes shut and begged for it to end. Begged to wake up from this nightmare.

I crawled towards him with heaving sobs and cradled his head in my lap.

"Help him," I pleaded. "Help Ryland. You have to help him!"

I held onto Ryland and stroked his hair in my fingers, telling him how much I loved him. Telling him that everything was okay, because we were together, and it was the only thing I could do.

Mick rattled off an address to someone on the phone and then kneeled down and rolled Ryland so he was completely flat. His eyes were closed, and there was blood seeping into his shirt. I let out a sob and held my hand against the wound as I felt for a pulse.

"You have to hold on, baby," I sobbed. "You have to hold on."

"The ambulance is on its way," Mick said, moving my hand so he could apply pressure to Ryland's wound. I let him, only so I could hold him.

I stroked his hair and pleaded with him to be okay.

He didn't move. And I couldn't look away from his face. I knew that Brayden was okay. I heard him trying to talk to me, but I couldn't look at him. I could only look at Ryland. I couldn't lose him. It wasn't fair. We'd finally just gotten things right. We were finally okay.

"Please, Ryland," I sobbed. "Please come back to me. You have to come back to me. I just can't do this without you."

I heard footsteps, and then the room filled with people I didn't know. Police and medics rushed in, trying to pry me away from him.

"Please," I begged. "He's my husband. You have to save him!"

Mick came and pulled me against him, trying to calm me as they lifted Ryland's body onto a board and carried him away.

"We have to go with him," I cried. "We have to go now!"

A policeman ushered us towards the door, and then I paused one last time. I knew I shouldn't look. But I had to see him. I had to see for myself.

I glanced back at the ground where Alfredo lay with hollow cheeks and lifeless eyes. There was blood everywhere and his body was riddled with bullets. I had done that. I had killed him. And I was glad.

Chapter Forty

Brighton

Three weeks, two days, six hours, and fourteen minutes.

Ryland laid in the hospital bed, his eyes closed, his hair perfect. I washed it and smoothed it into place for him every morning. His features weren't relaxed or at peace, and that's how I knew he was still with me.

The doctors had him hooked up to a bunch of machines. He wasn't breathing on his own, and they kept trying to talk to me about his brain activity. I wouldn't listen. I didn't need them to tell me what I knew in my heart.

I reached for his hand and stroked the tattoo on his ring finger. Even now, we were in sync. That wasn't a machine. That was something else. Something stronger than medicine or science could ever explain. When he stuttered, I stuttered. When his heart beat, mine would always echo. It wasn't even love. It transcended love. Ryland and I were something else entirely, and nobody could ever tell me otherwise.

I placed his palm against my chest and let him feel the rhythm beneath my skin.

"Do you feel that?" I asked him. "It still beats for you. I'm still here, waiting for you."

He didn't move, or give any indication he'd heard me. But I didn't expect him to. Ryland had been through so much in his life. He needed to rest. That's all this was. I believed it wholeheartedly. He was just resting.

"I know you're tired, baby," I whispered. "But you can't leave yet. I need you to come back to me when you're ready. Because I can't do this without you. I love you so much. You're my everything. I need my husband and our baby needs his father."

Silence.

My calm resolve fractured, the same way it did every day. I missed him so fucking much. I needed him so much. Our baby was due in a month, and I was so scared that he wouldn't be with me.

I hadn't left the hospital in days. There was a media circus going on outside, just waiting for a photo opportunity. Ever since the news broke that the crime had taken place in a warehouse owned by Alex Burton, a lot of other information had started to come to light.

I guess Alex didn't count on Alfredo failing, or getting rid of our bodies and the evidence. He was a fucking idiot, and I'd unleashed Edith on him with everything I had. I'd hired private investigators, and Mick was sniffing around for me too. I had every intention of bringing the full force of the law down on him, and even that wouldn't be enough. I finally understood Ryland's desire for revenge. It ate at me. It swirled and twisted inside of me, consuming me from the inside out.

I wanted anyone who had anything to do with this dead. I wanted to see their lifeless expressions just like I'd seen Alfredos. I wanted them all buried in the fucking ground.

But I also knew it wasn't healthy. If there was one thing I'd learned from all of this, it was that revenge and hatred could eat you alive if you let it. And if Ryland were awake right now, I knew he'd tell me as much. He'd tell me to be strong and keep my head focused on the things that mattered, like our baby.

So justice wouldn't be exactly what I wanted. But there would be justice. I couldn't sleep until there was. For the things that Robert and Alex Burton had done, all in the name of business.

Brayden told me that Ryland had made an agreement with Robert Burton. Shares of his company would go to Alex in exchange for my life. And upon Ryland's death, they planned to take over his company. But it was all coming out now, little by little. And the charges were racking up.

I'd never felt more relief than the moment Edith called me and uttered those words. That they had finally been arrested.

It didn't change what happened to Ryland. There was a gaping hole in my heart, and I didn't know if it would ever be the same. I had no choice but to move forward. To focus on each breath. Each task that needed to be done. I would do it for Ryland.

"Mrs. Bennett?"

I glanced up to see Dr. Kelly standing in the doorway. I tore my gaze back to Ryland and pretended not to notice. I didn't want to hear whatever he had to say.

“I’m glad I caught you.” He came into the room and stood with his chart, the same neutral expression on his face that he always wore.

I didn’t like him. I didn’t like that he had no faith in my husband or that he had no idea how much of a fighter Ryland was. That he would never give up on me. I hated his cold, clinical words and everything about him right down to his stupid white coat.

Dr. Kelly didn’t know I’d requested a specialist to come and see Ryland. I’d already set everything up, and he was flying in tomorrow. That was the benefit of being Ryland’s wife. Money talked, and I had plenty of it to throw around. I’d give it all away to the highest bidder that told me they could bring him back to me.

There were things that could be done in these cases. Things that could be tried. But Dr. Kelly didn’t want to try them. He told me it was all junk science when I’d begged him. And now he just lingered there awkwardly, waiting for me to take the bait. I wouldn’t. His words didn’t affect me anymore, and I was sick of hearing them. If it had been safe to move Ryland from this hospital, I would have. But for right now, I just had to stick it out. Like everything else.

“Look, Mrs. Bennett,” he spoke in a monotone voice. “It’s been a week since we last discussed your husband’s condition. There have been no signs of improvement, no indications I’m afraid. A decision needs to be made...”

“The decision has already been made,” I snarled. “I told you that last week. I’m telling you that today. I’ll tell you again next week. And the fucking week after that. Why are you badgering me about this?”

His lips flattened, and he looked down on me with pitiful eyes. As though I were a complete moron who just didn’t understand what he was telling me.

“We aren’t equipped to deal with long term care in this facility for cases like this,” he said. “So if you are committed to your decision, then I’ll have to advise you that he’ll need to be moved...”

All the anger inside of me boiled over at his tone and his careless indifference. He was talking about Ryland like he was a sack of potatoes. And I was so fucking sick of his disdain. Of all of this.

“Fuck you!” I spat. “Fuck all of you! You don’t know what he’s capable of. You don’t know what he’s survived. I can still feel him. He isn’t

gone. I don't give a shit what you say because I feel him! He's going to come back to me. He always comes back to me!"

Dr. Kelly took a step back from me as though I were a crazed animal, and Nicole ran into the room just in time to see me dissolving into hysterics.

"Brighton?" her voice was filled with concern as I collapsed against Ryland's chest and sobbed against him.

"What did you say to her?" she accused.

I didn't hear Dr. Kelly's response. Because a sharp pain rippled through my back and down my abdomen, causing me to lurch forward. It felt like something was tearing inside of me, and I didn't understand what was happening.

When I looked down at the hospital chair beneath me there was blood leaking out from my pants.

"Oh God... something's wrong."

White hot pain speared through my body as spots filled my vision. I briefly saw Nicole and Dr. Kelly rushing to my aid before I slumped forward and everything started to fade away.

Epilogue

Brighton

I felt his fingers ghosting over the tattoo on my chest, and I smiled.

It happened so often that I thought I was going crazy. There were times when it felt so real, but he wasn't there. It was like he was touching me from somewhere else, and it scared me. I was so afraid that one day I was going to wake up and it would all just be a dream. That I'd really lost him, and I'd imagined everything else somehow.

I blinked open my eyes and felt my heart stutter when I saw him staring down at me. I would never tire of looking into those beautiful eyes. I held his face and kissed him, deeply and passionately.

"I love you," I whispered.

"Love you too, baby girl." He nuzzled against me and breathed me in. "So fucking much."

Ryland had beaten the odds. He told me he always would. For me.

I understood his craziness now. I felt the same uncertainty he did every time I had to watch him walk out the door or drive to work. Fear had a permanent place in my heart, and it likely always would. It couldn't be helped. But I made the most of every single second I had with him. I told him every day how much I loved him.

We were a crazy pair, and our poor son would likely not have any semblance of a normal childhood with the two of us watching over him. But I lived by a new motto now, and it was that there was no such thing as being too protective.

I'd seen the flip side. I'd seen what happened when you hoped for the best or left things to chance. I wouldn't ever make that mistake again. My son would be well loved and well cared for, and he'd be raised by fiercely protective parents who nobody would ever dare fuck with again.

He came into this world screaming.

When my placenta ruptured, I had no idea what happened. They rushed me into surgery right away, and Jacob Jackson Bennett was delivered four weeks early.

He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. He looked just like Ryland, blue eyes and all. Sometimes when I looked at them, my heart was so full it hurt. I wouldn't ever let anyone take them away from me again.

I knew Ryland felt the same. There were so many nights that one of us would wake up in a panic at three am, desperately seeking out the other just to know they were still there. That they were real, and they hadn't disappeared.

We'd consume each other during those nights.

"I need you," I whispered.

It was all I ever had to say. Ryland wrapped my legs around him and entered me with a long, contented sigh. I clung to his body like it was my lifeline, and he kissed and licked and worshipped me while he moved in time to the beat of our hearts.

This was our morning ritual. Our evening ritual. And our everything in between ritual. We stole every precious moment we could to connect like this. People said we were crazy for still being so in love. It was true. Our love was the craziest thing I'd ever experienced. It knew no bounds. It couldn't be contained. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Come to the office tomorrow afternoon," Ryland ordered, already planning out our next encounter. "I want to fuck you over my desk."

His words had the intended effect and I detonated around him with an explosion of color behind my eyelids. Ryland followed with a pained grunt as he fell to the bed beside me. He pulled me into his arms and kissed my face until his ragged breathing calmed.

"Who cares about tomorrow?" I teased circles around his chest. "We still have all afternoon."

Ryland laughed and pulled me even closer, splaying his hand across my belly. I knew what he was thinking without even having to ask. He was worrying about what would happen in six months. When he'd learned what happened with Jake's birth, he panicked and said we were never going to have any more.

Eventually, I got the doctor to convince him that it was going to be perfectly fine and that they would monitor me carefully just in case.

After the specialist had come to see Ryland, I was a believer in miracles. He'd found a way to help him. To bring him back to me. And while I would never really know if it was medicine or sheer determination, I didn't care. The only thing that mattered was he was there.

“What do you think of this one?” Ryland asked.

I glanced at the paper in his hands and shrugged. It was my decision, but every year I’d left it up to him. Even though he’d never said so, I knew it was important to him. So I always let him choose who the foundation’s scholarship would go to that year.

“That was the one I was going to pick.” I smiled and leaned into his touch.

He was so warm, just like always.

He set the paperwork aside and his hands wandered over my breasts while his lips grazed my chest. I knew what he was kissing. The place I’d been permanently marked, for him.

I’d gotten the tattoo of his and Jake’s heartbeats on our one-year wedding anniversary. Something permanent. Something nobody could ever take away from me again.

His hands caressed my face with a contented sigh as he kissed his way along my neck. Every once in a while his teeth would graze my skin and then he’d make his claim on me. The darkness that would likely always be a part of Ryland was still there, but it didn’t overshadow him anymore. He still had moments where the grief threatened to swallow him whole, but he knew how to control it now. And I could always tell when he squeezed Jake in his arms a little bit tighter, he was having one of those moments. If there was ever any claim that another man loved his son more than Ryland, you wouldn’t be able to convince me.

“What do you think we should name this one?” he murmured as he stroked my belly.

“Hmm...” I pretended to think on it as I stared out at the bay. “I think we should follow tradition. I was thinking maybe Anna Sophia.”

Ryland pulled my gaze back to his as he stared at me anxiously. “We’re having a girl?”

“Yep.” I grinned.

He crushed me against his chest and breathed a sigh of relief. I’d snuck off to the ultrasound without him this morning, because he always got too nervous while we waited for the baby’s heartbeat.

“Christ,” he grumbled. “Little girls are completely different.”

“You’ll do great,” I assured him. “Just like you do with Jake.”

“Speaking of...” Ryland smirked as the front door slammed shut.

Nicole and Matt had taken Jake to the zoo for the day, and judging by the smiles on their faces, it had been a good one. Jake bolted straight onto the back deck and snuggled up between me and Ryland.

“I pumped him full of sugar.” Nicole laughed. “I couldn’t help it.”

Matt shrugged and laughed. “God help our future children.”

He reached out and gave me a quick hug, followed by a handshake for Ryland. The two of them had grown surprisingly close over the last few years, and I was glad to see that Nicole was finally happy. It took her a while to accept that it was okay for her to move on, but Matt patiently saw it through. For the most part, everything in our lives had finally calmed down.

Norma-Jean was living in California now, and she was still sober. Looking at her now, it was hard to remember the woman that she used to be. She had a job and was dating a nice man named Ted, who just so happened to be Ryland’s driver.

As for Brayden, we weren’t as close as we used to be and I didn’t know if that would ever change. In the end, him and Ryland had come together with a common goal. To protect me. They could be in a room together now without wanting to kill each other, but I couldn’t look at him the same way again, and he understood. Just as he’d never been able to look at me the same after that day.

I was no longer the naïve and frightened girl that I used to be. In the end, my blood ran true, and I became my father’s daughter. I killed Alfredo, and I would do it again in a heartbeat. Though he never said so, I knew Brayden didn’t like seeing that part of me. It crushed him that he failed me and brought me into that mess. That I was forced to embrace the darker part of myself.

But they lived in unison inside of me, just as they did in Ryland. Just as they did in everybody, really. The light and darkness were always there if you really stopped to look.

“Mama?” Jake tugged on my shirt to get my attention. “Can I stay with Aunt Nicole and Uncle Matt tonight?”

Nicole beamed the same way she always did whenever Jake looked her way. His looks and charm were all Ryland, with the bonus of a cute little dimple in his cheek.

Matt looked like he was about to panic, and I shot him a reassuring glance.

“Not tonight, buddy,” I scooped him up onto my lap. “We have a special surprise tonight.”

“We do?” Jake asked excitedly.

Ryland and I both looked at each other and laughed as Nicole pouted.

She didn’t know it yet, but the surprise was really for her. Because tonight was the night Matt was finally going to propose.

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You are the peanut butter to my jelly. My sister from another mister.
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Need I go on?

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